

CONSUMPTION JUNCTION, WHAT'S ITS FUNCTION?
CONSUMER CO-OPERATIVES, STATE-CITIZEN RELATIONS, AND
CONSUMER CULTURE IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

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By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is the first in-depth English study of East Germany's Union of the Consumer Co-operatives (*Konsum*). It explores the roles of this organization, while alluding to the nature of power relations, Soviet-style socialism, and the tensions between the progressive discourse and the totalitarian elements of socialism in East Germany. The aim of this dissertation is to augment the historiography of the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, **SBZ – 1945 to 1949**) and the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, **DDR – 1949 to 1990**) by examining the ways in which the *Konsum* contributed to the highly modern and totalitarian aspirations of the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, **SED – 1946 to 1990**). In examining the SED's ability to use the *Konsum* to infuse ideology into everyday life, this study provides new understandings of the ways in which the party's actions affected its citizens, and the ways in which citizens responded to, averted, and manipulated the SED's politicization of their daily lives. In other words, the *Konsum* became a junction between the citizenry and the state. To this end, the study has drawn attention to the state's incursion into the mundane aspects of everyday life in the realms of education, work, and consumption. To substantiate this examination, I have referred to numerous archival sources and interviews with East Germans associated with the *Konsum*. Thus, the core contribution of this dissertation rests in the blending of archival material, secondary sources, and interviews in light of the ideas associated with the concepts of attempted totalitarianism, modernism, individual agency, and selective participation. Moreover, this research and source analysis presents a novel departure from the secondary sources cited in this work by illustrating the possible motivations for certain actors, whether state authorities or individuals, to make ideological statements and employ specific types of behaviour.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

<i>Agitation</i>	<i>Agitation</i> can be directly translated into English as agitation. While the English use of the word more directly relates to some sort of mental anxiety, the German term is limited to a political context in the sense of political rabble-rousing.
AKB	<i>Archiv Konsumverband Berlin</i> (Archive of the VDK housed at the current headquarters of the <i>Zentralkonsum</i> in Berlin)
<i>Bezirk</i>	A district of East Germany after 1952 (there were fourteen in total)
Bloc parties	“Bourgeois” parties allied to the SED
BRD	<i>Bundesrepublik Deutschland</i> (Federal Republic of Germany)
BStU	<i>Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes</i> The East German secret police archive in Berlin contains files regarding the infiltration of the Stasi into the <i>Konsum</i> workforce and Stasi observations of consumption and consumers within <i>Konsum</i> stores in order to gauge the mood of the population.
Building of Socialism	The final transition of the DDR from an antifascist democratic polity to a Soviet-style socialist system, beginning in July 1952.
CDU	<i>Christlich-Demokratische Union</i> (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DDR	<i>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</i> (German Democratic Republic)
DFD	<i>Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands</i> (Democratic Women's League of Germany) - It was established as a mass women's organization in March 1947 and attempted to re-educate women in the spirit of antifascism. It was one of the members of the National Front and sent representatives to the <i>Volkskammer</i> .
<i>Eingaben</i>	Formal complaints made in written or verbal form directed at any party official or governing body, including the <i>Konsum</i> .
FDGB	<i>Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</i> (The Free German Trade Union Federation) was the trade union federation in East Germany - It was part of the National Front and had representatives in the <i>Volkskammer</i> .
FDJ	<i>Freie Deutsche Jugend</i> (Free German Youth) was the East German Communist youth movement, a member of the National Front and

representative in the *Volkskammer*.

<i>Frauenförderungsplan</i>	Program to further women's professional education
<i>Genossenschaftsrat VDK</i>	The highest authority of the <i>Konsum</i>
HO	The state trade organization <i>Handelsorganisation</i> (HO) was a network of retail stores established in November 1948. In these stores, East Germans had the opportunity to buy (un)rationed goods, albeit at initially very high prices. The result of these price discrepancies engendered a two-tiered retail system. Furthermore, the HO stores served two purposes: they soaked up additional cash that was circulating in the DDR through piecework and higher wages, and they served as a key advertisement for the régime by displaying concrete proof of the improvements in everyday life and showing off the promise of consumer plenty. The HO chain rapidly expanded and its numbers may have equated or even surpassed those of the <i>Konsum</i> , with 25,000 retail outlets and 37 percent of DDR's retail trade. During the DDR, the HO competed with the <i>Konsum</i> ; however, the HO did not survive the <i>Wende</i> .
IM	<i>inoffizielle Mitarbeiter</i> - voluntary informers or Stasi informants
<i>Intershop</i>	A chain of government-run retail stores in which only hard currencies, such as the U.S. dollar, West German Mark, or British Pound could be used to purchase high-quality goods.
<i>Konsum</i>	Union of the Consumer Co-operatives of the DDR (see also VDK). The organization <i>Konsum</i> should not to be confused with the English verb consume.
KPD	<i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschland</i> (Communist Party of Germany)
<i>Kreis</i>	A local authority of East Germany after 1952 (there were 217 in total)
<i>Land</i>	A state in eastern Germany until 1952 (there were five in total: Mecklenburg, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia, see also entry for <i>Bezirk</i> and <i>Kreis</i>)
LAB	<i>Landesarchiv Berlin</i> – Berlin State Archives
LDPD or LDP	<i>Liberal-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Liberal Democratic Party of Germany)
LPG	<i>Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft</i> (Agricultural Co-operative) – LPGs were collectivized farms based on the Soviet model

MdN	East German currency (<i>Marken der deutsche Notenbank</i>)
MfS	<i>Ministerium für Staatssicherheitsdienst</i> Ministry for State Security (see also Stasi)
National Front	The East German Parliament (<i>Volkskammer</i> or People's Chamber) was the single legislative chamber of the DDR. Its members (from its founding in 1949 until the first free elections on 18 March 1990) were elected on a slate called the National Front.
New Course	Policy reversal of the Building of Socialism, which was implemented in July 1953. It entailed a relaxation of the collectivization of agriculture, the end of the persecution of church members, and the elimination of restrictions on private business owners.
<i>Ostalgie</i>	A term derived from the German words <i>Ost</i> (east) and <i>Nostalgie</i> (nostalgia) referring to nostalgia for certain aspects of life, most notably consumer culture, in the former East Germany.
“Party of the new type”	Party based on the CPSU model
SAPMO-DDR	<i>Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR</i> – The archive of parties and mass-organization of the DDR housed in Berlin Lichterfelde
SBZ	<i>Sowjetische Besatzungszone</i> – Soviet Occupied Zone in Germany, 1945 to 1949 (See also SBZ/DDR)
SBZ/DDR	A term used in this dissertation to describe the period of Soviet occupation from 1945 to 1949 and the lifespan of the DDR from 1949 to 1990
SED	<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</i> (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
Selective Participation	The process by which East Germans negotiated with and participated in state structures to further their own interests.
SMAD	<i>Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland</i> (Soviet Military Administration in Germany)
SPD	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SSC	<i>Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz</i> – the Chemnitz Branch of the Saxon State Archive

SSL	<i>Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig</i> – Leipzig branch of the Saxon State Archive
Stasi	<i>Staatssicherheitsdienst</i> (East German ministry for state security or MfS)
SWA	<i>Sächsisches Wirtschaftsarchiv</i> is a regional archive in Leipzig, which houses the files of the <i>Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig</i> from 1884 to 1990 and the files of the <i>Konsumgenossenschaft-Zwickau</i> from 1873 to 1990
TSM	<i>Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Meiningen</i>
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VDK/VdK	<i>Verband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften</i> was the centralized administrative organ responsible for the Consumer Co-operatives of the DDR. It was founded in 1949 in East Berlin. The VDK was to act as a counterpart to the West German <i>Zentralverband der deutschen Konsumgenossenschaften</i> (ZdK). The VDK had to ensure that the goals of the centralized plans were fulfilled. In 1972, the VDK underwent a name change: <i>Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR</i> (VdK). By 1989, the VdK administered 198 consumer co-operatives with 4.6 million members. It survived the fall of the DDR and became the <i>Konsumverband</i> in 1999 and in 2008 the <i>Zentralkonsum</i> .
<i>Verkaufsgespräch</i>	Sales pitch
<i>Volkskammer</i>	East German Parliament
VoPo	A colloquial abbreviation for the <i>Volkspolizei</i> (People's Police)
VP	<i>Volkspolizei</i> (People's Police)
<i>Wende</i>	The process of change from socialism to capitalism in East Germany in the years 1989 and 1990
ZK	<i>Zentralkomitee</i> (Central Committee or CC)

1. Introduction

Through the improved fulfillment of the wishes of our consumers, friendlier service, and better-informed customer consultations, the *Konsum* had the potential to make the face of socialism in East Germany more attractive to citizens.

- The administrative branch of a co-operative in Leipzig.¹

The superiority of socialism will be proven *not* by the over-fulfillment of economic plans, but through quality consumer goods and tasteful consumption.

- SED Secretary Walter Ulbricht in Berlin in 1959²



Illustration 1: A *Konsum* shop window in Schwerin (circa 1950s) promoting the foreign politics of the Soviet Union as the guarantor of peace and independence of all peoples³

¹ SWA: U64/240, Erklärung des Genossenschaftsrates des Verbandes der Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Berlin, de. 25. Oktober 1989, 2.

² Der Handel im Siebenjahrplan der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und seine Aufgaben zur weiteren Verbesserung der Versorgung der Bevölkerung, Berlin 1959, S.4., as quoted in Annette Kaminsky, *Illustrierte Konsum-geschichte der DDR* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 1998), 25.

The focus on a central institution of East German society, the Union of the Consumer Cooperatives of the DDR (*Konsum*), is pivotal to a comprehensive understanding of the economic, social, cultural, political, and gender history of the Soviet Occupation Zone (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, **SBZ**) and the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, **DDR**). It is important for the reader to understand that that the terms SBZ and DDR represent not only a singular geographical space, but also temporal periods. The SBZ, as seen in the map below, was the area of Germany occupied by the Soviet armies from May 1945 to October 1949. The SBZ then became a state commonly referred to as East Germany on 7 October 1949 until its official disbandment and absorption into West Germany in October 1990. At times, I use the acronym SBZ/DDR, which represents the combined temporal period from 1945 to 1990, but the singular geographical space seen in Map 1.



Map 1: SBZ/DDR in central Europe⁴

³ AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und politischen Themen, Image 457, Konsum-Genossenschaftsverband - Bezirk Schwerin - Agitation und Werbung (date not given - probably the 1950s).

⁴ East Germany, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:East_Germany_1956-1990.svg (August 2012).

The *Konsum* was a massive organization, which served multiple societal and ideological functions in the DDR. Its omnipresence is evidenced by an outlet in nearly every town and village for a total of 21,000 retail outlets, 544 department stores, 399 stores that sold agricultural goods, as well as production factories and restaurants. By 1988, these *Konsum* locations served a membership of around 4.6 million and employed a combined (mostly female) 287,000 workers.⁵ In 1990, East Germany had a population of just over 16 million; this means that the *Konsum* employed roughly one out of every fifty working adults. Such an extensive network of members and employees ensured that the *Konsum* was a useful communications network for the ruling party of East Germany – Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, **SED** – **1946 to 1990**). In addition, the *Konsum* provided its members, especially in the countryside, with cultural activities, such as musical performances, fashion shows, and so on. To serve its employees, the *Konsum* operated a network of schools, and provided educational courses that ranged from basic co-operative principles to the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. The *Konsum* also conducted foreign policy on behalf of the SED. Hence, the *Konsum* became a conduit for promoting the East German state narrative and foreign policy ambitions to other co-operative organizations and states from around the world. Furthermore, the *Konsum* served basic propaganda functions via its – at times – politically charged advertisements and publishing network. While conducting these economic and political functions, the *Konsum* became a junction between state and citizenry; what is more, it left behind a massive paper trail, providing a unique vantage point into the ways in which both were reacting to and trying to influence each other. I use this evidence to make a novel contribution to the historiography of East Germany.

⁵ Andreas Herbst, Winfried Ranke, and Jürgen Winkler, "Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR (VDK)," in *So funktionierte die DDR, Bd. 2: Lexikon der Organisationen und Institutionen* (Hamburg: Reinbek, 1994), 1113.

1.1. Thesis

My argument has five primary components. First, I investigate the ways in which the *Konsum* functioned as a political and economic tool of the SED. Various sources (interviews and secondary literature) claim that the *Konsum* was an independent and private enterprise in contrast to a state-owned enterprise.⁶ In fact, following the demise of the East German state, the *Konsum* was labelled a private and membership owned enterprise. This recognition enabled the *Konsum* to avoid being privatized like other East German industries (the *Konsum* in post-DDR years will be discussed in the conclusion). Be that as it may, the *Konsum* functioned as a *de facto* state-owned enterprise (*Volkseigene Betriebe*), since it was funnelling a substantial amount of its profits back to the régime.⁷ Indeed, on the basis of my research in various archives throughout the former East Germany, I suggest that this organization wholeheartedly supported the political and economic system of the SED in the party's attempt to build a socialist society.⁸ Nevertheless, I also maintain that the *Konsum* had some latitude and independence in devising and implementing state plans. What is more, the *Konsum* had a voluntary membership base, with some functioning membership democracy within its lower levels through elected consumer committees. Hence, there is evidence of some pluralism in the lower levels of the system.⁹

Second, I maintain that the *Konsum* functioned as a political mass-organization. The term mass-organization fits within the historical contexts of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and East Germany, and refers to various political, educational, and economic organizations with large memberships. Normally, the qualifications for joining were low, since their purpose was to

⁶ Wilhelm Kaltenborn, *Genossenschaftsrecht und Modernisierung: 130 Jahre Gesetzgebung im Wandel der Zeit* (Berlin: Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften, 1997), 1.

⁷ Mustafa Haikal, *Gute Geschäfte: Die Geschichte der Leipziger Konsumgenossenschaft* (Faber & Faber, 2009), 155-61.

⁸ LAB: C Rep. 901 Nr. 328, Vertreterwahlen 1950.

⁹ Peter Grieder, "In Defence of Totalitarianism Theory as a Tool of Historical Scholarship," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 3-4 (2007): 564.

inculcate the ideology of the party to the millions of members within the mass-organization and by extension wider segments of the population. The most influential of the East German mass-organizations were the Free German Youth (*Freie Deutsche Jugend*, **FDJ**) and the Free German Trade Union Federation (*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, **FDGB**). Both had memberships reaching into the millions. As was the case for the FDJ and FDGB, the SED *attempted* to have the *Konsum* function as a mass-organization and as a robust political instrument by indoctrinating its employees (with a special focus on young and female workers), members, and consumers by virtue of inculcating SED ideology in *Konsum* workplaces, *Konsum* shops, and *Konsum* schools. More specifically, I base this argument on the *Konsum*'s close contact with East Germans on a near daily basis.

Third, the *Konsum*, although conceived in the early years of the DDR as a carrier of SED communications and slogans, became over time a two-way communications apparatus with information moving in both directions. Specifically, it promulgated Soviet and SED ideology, particularly to targeted societal groups: youth, women, families, and rural residents. The *Konsum* inculcated these societal elements with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that were required for their integration into the emerging East German state. Again, as opposed to the *Konsum* being just a “transmission-belt” of state communications (one-way), I contrast and moderate this discussion of top-down communications by exploring how East Germans communicated through the *Konsum* (bottom-up and two-way). The *Konsum* had to help integrate these groups into the socialist project. With women, this meant affording them the “proper” forms of gender categorization, namely employed, politically active, and educated mothers, which was in binary opposition to unemployed housewives. Ultimately, an important

(or intended) function of the *Konsum* was to integrate women into the world of work and politics.

Fourth, the SED, for its part, used the *Konsum* to communicate to East Germans the legitimacy of their state through daily interactions with customers, consumers, and members in the thousands of consumer co-operative retail outlets. Specifically, the *Konsum* used consumerism as a means to promulgate official state narratives portraying the DDR as a modern, collectivist, socialist, and consumer society. The opposite often occurred, however. By comparison to the abundant consumer culture of West Germany, the highly politicized, corrupt, and generally disappointing consumption experience in the *Konsum* retail outlets made the face of socialism unattractive for its millions of members and consumers.

Fifth, the East German secret police or Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, MfS, commonly known as the **Stasi**) permeated all aspects of the East German economy and the country's consumer culture. Because consumerism intersected with culture, economics, and socio-political factors, it became a crucial link between the Stasi and society. Moreover, consumption was always a complex negotiation between the party leadership, various governmental and economic apparatuses, and the population.¹⁰ However, according to historians Burghard Ciesla and Patrice G. Poutrus, consumption needs were always secondary and only received attention when it became necessary to deal with supply shortages, or in crisis situations that were no longer "manageable."¹¹ When such a crisis situation occurred, the Stasi would have to intervene and put out the flames. To illustrate this point, I examine the relationship between the Stasi and the *Konsum*. Every aspect of consumption in the DDR was inherently political,

¹⁰ Philipp Heldmann, *Herrschaft, Wirtschaft, Anoraks: Konsumpolitik in der DDR der Sechzigerjahre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 9-10.

¹¹ Burghard Ciesla and Patrice G. Poutrus, "Food Supply in a Planned Economy: SED Nutrition Policy between Crisis Response and Popular Needs," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 145.

right down to the provision of (or failure to provide) meat, toys, and toilet paper. Ultimately, consumption became a politicized test of the régime's claim to be a successful socialist state. For this reason, the Stasi not only monitored, but also defended the interests of the consumers subscribing to the socialist consumer aesthetic. Therefore, the fifth part of my thesis is the idea that the Stasi was intervening in economic affairs and conflating consumer satisfaction with security.

1.2. Structure and organization

This dissertation is structured thematically and is broken down into four overarching parts, which are further broken down into chapters, sections, and sub-sections.

Part I includes two chapters that flesh out several of the themes put forward in the introduction. Chapter 2 examines the DDR's economic and political developments within the broader context of the Stalinization of East Germany and the Cold War; thus, it provides the reader with a historical orientation by which to navigate and understand various themes that are discussed in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 3 focuses on the re-establishment of consumer co-operatives immediately following the end of the Second World War. This chapter clearly defines the *Konsum*'s new political and economic roles under SED hegemony.

Part II also examines in more detail the régime's strategies to utilize the *Konsum* for its own ends, and it is framed around the overarching theme of persuasion. In other words, these chapters chart how the government ceaselessly sought to persuade citizens to its domestic and international point of view through education and consumerism. Chapter 4 deals with the *Konsum*'s political role as a mass-organization and the ways in which it targeted various societal groups. Chapter 5 continues with this theme of persuasion and discusses the international role of the *Konsum*. This chapter demonstrates how wider (Cold War) historical events were reflected

in the documents the *Konsum* produced. Chapter 6 explores *Konsum* education. It establishes that improving the educational level and competence of its own members, as well as validating their loyalty to the SED, became the primary preoccupation of the *Konsum* schools. Chapter 7 describes the ways in which the *Konsum* was used as a means to communicate with the citizenry by way of consumption and shop window displays in *Konsum* stores. This chapter shows that the *Konsum* was a central junction between state and citizenry, and that it was in these stores that the SED tried extensively to convince and persuade East Germans that their socialist state was worth having and keeping. Again, the common thread tying these chapters together is the notion of persuasion to the SED's socialist set of values, social identity, and way of life.

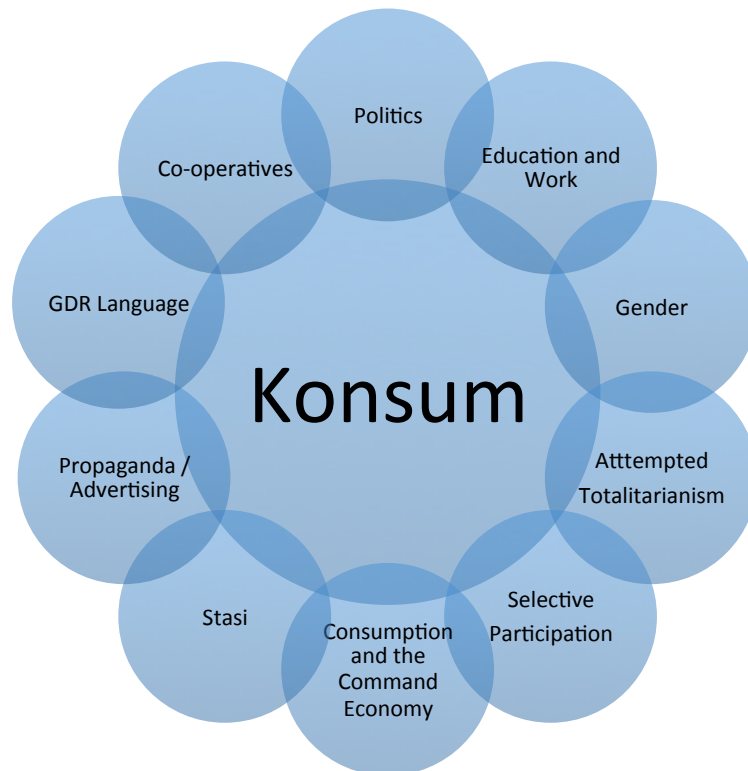
Though Part II is primarily from the perspective of the state (top-down), Part III (Chapters 8 and 9) takes a bottom-up perspective and is largely concerned with the idea of rejection, providing a counterpoint to the preceding four chapters. Thus, Chapter 8 examines East Germans' daily interactions with the *Konsum* and the ways in which the population navigated the state-controlled consumer culture. In this section, I rely on the idea of selective participation as a conceptual cornerstone to illustrate that East Germans negotiated with state structures to further their own materialistic interests. Chapter 9 continues to explore how individuals engaged with the *Konsum* from the vantage point of *Konsum* employees and the ways in which customers and sales staff interacted with and tried to influence each other to their respective advantage.

Part IV consists of a conclusion and bibliography. The conclusion reiterates the main arguments of this work and briefly describes what happened to the *Konsum* following the demise of the East German state. It closes with a brief discussion of the lessons learned while writing this dissertation, and potential avenues for further research.

Three appendixes supplement the text. The first is a collection of maps. The second introduces and is a first step towards an examination of the presidents of the *Konsum*. The third appendix gives the reader a better sense of the interview process by outlining the general questions given to the interviewee.

While this dissertation is structured around an examination of different aspects of the *Konsum*, it is primarily about the integration of women into socialism, consumerism, and the state-citizen relationship in the DDR. To put it another way, the *Konsum* was a special node or junction through which consumption, gender, socialism, and Stasi surveillance along with other aspects of East German socialism converged (see diagram below).

Table 1: The *Konsum* as a junction and a vehicle of historical analysis



1.3. Concepts and régime-descriptors

The following sub-sections explore three main conceptual components that are continually referred to and utilized throughout this dissertation. These key ideas include: discourse, the consumer-tactician, attempted totalitarianism, selective participation, modernism, and gender categorization. These concepts reflect the tensions and contradictions of everyday life, namely the possibilities of high levels of individual agency within totalitarian state structures. The ways in which the state used totalitarian methods and means (e.g., deep incursion into and close observation of the lives of citizens) to achieve modernist and progressive ends (female participation in state structures and governance) was also something of a contradiction. These contradictions are especially evident in the discussions about state-citizenry relations in the realms of education, work, and consumption. For this reason, I use the term *junction* to describe the *Konsum* because I perceive it as a space in which propaganda, consumption, discourse, gender, and ideology converged.

1.3.1. Discourse

Discourse is language that takes shape in relation to the dominant power base. It consists of linguistic and knowledge systems determining what can be said and who has the authority to say it. At its most basic, discourse is a system of inclusion and exclusion. Philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault states, “In a society such as our own we all know the rules of *exclusion*. The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is *prohibited*. We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything.”¹² Although best known for his studies on social institutions, most notably psychiatry and the prison system,

¹² Michel Foucault, “The Discourse on Language (1971),” in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 149.

as well as his histories on sexuality, Foucault's works on power and discourse – though not directly related – are applicable to a study on East Germany.

The DDR, like all societies, had its system of discourses and “régimes of truths.”¹³

Foucault argues:

Each society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of disclosure which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹⁴

Within this contextualization, this dissertation deals with the language of the SED. As will be seen in later chapters, East Germans learned to use and manipulate the systems of discourse to their advantage. Nevertheless, they had to adhere to the rules in order to avert the life-threatening aspects of the régime.¹⁵

1.3.2. The consumer-tactician

The *Konsum* produced goods, physical spaces, and discourse under the supervision of the SED. Therefore, the consumer in the DDR was required to do more than simply consume products; rather, consumers became “consumer-tacticians” by navigating everyday life in the DDR and, as will be seen in later chapters (see especially section 8.2), in ways that were never fully intended by the régime. To formulate and qualify my use of the construct of the consumer-tactician, I draw heavily on the analysis of Michel de Certeau, a French Jesuit and scholar. Like de Certeau, I treat the consumer as a tactician of everyday life. In the DDR, the consumer had to navigate a range of state-controlled representations. Although directly referring to Manhattan of the 1980s, the following quotation by de Certeau is also applicable to the DDR or any urbanized

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Foucault, "Discourse on Language," 149.

space for that matter: “urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by the newspapers, and so on” are all expressions of state power.¹⁶ This was, in other words, consumption “disseminated and imposed by the ‘elites.’”¹⁷ Yet, consumers made “innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and their own rules... the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.”¹⁸ This political dimension meant that consumers had to employ the established discourses found on television, in newspapers, and in advertisements of the SED-state to carry out their interests that were separate from those of the régime. Therefore, the everyday practice of consumption in the DDR became a tactical deployment of “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, ‘hunter’s cunning,’ maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.”¹⁹

1.3.3. Attempted totalitarianism

The concept of totalitarianism has constantly come in and out of fashion within academic debates and the historiography of East Germany. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hannah Arendt expanded the concept of totalitarianism in her classic, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt applied totalitarian theory to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and characterized a totalitarian régime as a state resorting to an all-pervasive terror to impose total control over society. For Arendt, a totalitarian society is defined by the revolutionary or radical aspects of the régime, which are based on a single (all-encompassing) ideology and a constant mobilization of the masses. In her words: “totalitarian movements are mass-organizations of atomized, isolated

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii.

¹⁷ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁸ Ibid., xiv-xvii.

¹⁹ Ibid., xix-xx.

individuals. Compared with all other parties and movements, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional, and unalterable loyalty of the individual member.”²⁰

Totalitarianism, according to historian Fulbrook, served the Cold War purpose of combining the histories of the Soviet Union under Stalin and Germany under Hitler into a single narrative.²¹ This conceptualization of totalitarianism, therefore, served specific political purposes in the Cold War era and became an instrument for West German politicians and academics to de-legitimize and describe the Soviet Union and the new East German state. However, with the onset of *Ostpolitik* (a thawing in East-West relations in the early 1970s), a number of scholars dropped this term in favour of new conceptualizations of comparison, namely the perception that Hitler’s Germany was chaotic and polycentric. By the 1980s, the concept of totalitarianism appeared to be outmoded and unfashionable within academic and political circles. Yet, as the severity of the crimes of the Communist states and the omnipresence of their security apparatuses were revealed after the fall of the Wall and the opening of the East German archives, the term totalitarianism became resonant again, although it currently competes with other régime-descriptors, such as modern and participatory (see section 1.3.5).²²

In a 1999 publication, historian Jürgen Kocka endorses the basic tenets of totalitarianism when applied to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, but he argues that it is *not* applicable to the DDR. In his words, “with this definition Arendt most definitely had Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union in mind; her analysis ‘fits’ these two systems extremely well, and

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New with added prefaces. ed. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), 323.

²¹ Mary Fulbrook, "The Limits of Totalitarianism: God, State and Society in the GDR," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 7(1997): 25-27.

²² Ibid.

continues to do so to this day.”²³ In his view, however, the DDR cannot be considered completely totalitarian, as it became less brutal after the death of Stalin in 1953. Simply put, the régime, although maintaining its dictatorial and Soviet methods of rule, did not unleash the same degree of violence and terror, as did Nazi Germany or the USSR under Stalinist rule. Instead, the DDR collapsed bloodlessly.²⁴ However, while Kocka is correct in that the DDR never unleashed the mass violence of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, classical attributes of Hanna Arendt’s totalitarian model are clearly identifiable in the DDR, especially the notion that these states were able to heavily influence and control (although not completely) the lives of citizens. The régime used co-operatives in an effort to carry out one primary totalitarian aspiration: to infiltrate and observe the lives and behaviours of its consumers, members, and employees. For this reason, totalitarianism is a pertinent régime-descriptor for this East German state, as well as a useful concept and tool of scholarly analysis for helping explain and describe certain aspects of the East German régime and the *Konsum*.²⁵

Further to Arendt’s use of totalitarianism, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski broaden the definition of a totalitarian régime by identifying six interrelated features: a single mass party typically led by a dictator; a totalizing and revolutionary ideology; a system of terror directed at specific “enemies of the régime;” complete control of the propaganda apparatus; a weapons monopoly; and a centrally controlled economy.²⁶ Friedrich and Brzezinski define totalitarianism as the state’s successful control and planning of all areas of life on the basis of a binding ideology via a modern technical and organizational means. They state:

²³ Jürgen Kocka, "The GDR: A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 23.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Grieder, "In Defence of Totalitarianism," 565.

²⁶ Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Praeger, 1965), 22.

[Totalitarianism] is a theory that centres on the régime's efforts to remould and transform the human beings under its control in the image of its ideology. As such, it might be called an ideological or anthropological theory of totalitarianism. The theory holds that the "essence" of totalitarianism is to be seen in such a régime's total control of the everyday life of its citizens, of its control, more particularly, of their thoughts and attitudes as well as their activities.²⁷

My interpretation of totalitarianism in the context of the DDR is similar to Friedrich's and Brzezinski's, yet slightly more nuanced. In my view, the SED often used totalitarian means that resulted in some progressive ends, namely to bring about high levels of female education and employment. Thus, the term totalitarian is useful for a historical study of the DDR, for it denotes the politicization of everyday life and the notion that the state attempted to infuse ideology into every aspect of citizens' experiences and activities. The word "attempt" is important, since total control of the régime over its population is an impossible goal – even in the most extreme cases of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin. Still, the SED's style and system of rule carried totalitarian overtones, especially in the state's infancy from about 1945 to 1955. Clearly, totalitarianism cannot explain every facet of life in the DDR; however, by using it I hope to emphasize that the SED effectively politicized – or to use Soviet terminology, democratically centralized – every aspect of the *Konsum* and the ways in which it communicated and interacted with its employees and members.

Historian Gary Bruce, while reviewing Andrew Port's *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic*,²⁸ argues that the current historiographical trend is moving away from emphasizing the "totalitarian" aspects of the régime. According to Bruce, historians are now focusing on the more positive and participatory aspects of the dictatorship. He puts it this way:

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Andrew I. Port, *Conflict and Stability in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Victims of the Stasi may rightly be insulted by the fact that these works almost always contain a clause like “not discounting the suffering of those affected by the Stasi” before commenting on some other aspect of the régime. We must not ignore that the trend of downplaying repressive measures in the DDR has established itself... The pendulum, which has swung far from the very real, very harmful, very controlling aspects of the régime, must start to swing back.²⁹

Fulbrook has challenged Bruce’s pendulum metaphor. She stresses that East German historiography should move in a direction avoiding discussion of totalitarian aspects. In the following quotation, she gainsays Bruce:

The character and development of the ruling communist party, and the structures of power and repression in the *Stasi*, has been the subject of intensive analysis. But the ways in which the system was carried and sustained from within, by lower-level functionaries and ordinary people, has to date received less attention than they arguably deserve. These, too, were key elements in the “normalization of rule” in the middle decades of the DDR’s history; and the erosion of this system was a significant factor in the de-legitimisation that preceded the more dramatic events of 1989.³⁰

Concepts like totalitarianism and normalization are useful when studying a specific subject and for striking a certain tone with the reader. For example, totalitarianism helps define the politicization of daily life and the attempts by the state to penetrate deeply into every aspect of citizens’ experiences and activities. Undoubtedly, term selections, as well as an author’s vernacular, establish the tone and feel of a piece of work. For instance, normalization (Fulbrook), which is analogous to totalitarianism in some sense, sounds less hard-hitting than totalitarian (Bruce). My use of the term totalitarian purposefully strikes a weightier tone by encapsulating the ambitions and ends of the hyper-intrusive East German surveillance state. Both Fulbrook and Bruce are quoted throughout this work and neither is right nor wrong; rather, each approach is useful at certain analytical junctures.

²⁹ Gary Bruce, "H-NET BOOK REVIEW," (2007).

³⁰ Mary Fulbrook, "The Concept of 'Normalization' and the GDR in Comparative Perspective," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalization of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 26.

Prominent historian and Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw argues that totalitarianism can be used to understand the aspirations of the ruling power. Kershaw points out, “The totalitarianism concept always held that there were special features – unprecedented inroads into society [and individual lives] through new techniques of mass mobilization and new levels and types of repression – which distinguished it from other categories of modern dictatorship.”³¹ Within totalitarian régimes, Kershaw argues that there was a “total claim” made by the rulers on the ruled. In his view, “the régime seeks through a varied combination of manipulation and terror to homogenize and mobilize the population in the interests of revolutionary goals... and [allows] no space for any alternative; totalitarian régimes try ‘to win soul as well as body.’”³² Kershaw’s framework is applicable to this study in the context of the *Konsum*, since it describes the SED state by identifying its deep infiltration into all aspects of life while simultaneously trying to win the support of the populace (the soul and body as in Kershaw’s definition) by means of consumption, education, and employment. Of course, the SED’s totalitarianism was neither complete nor successful; for this reason, this dissertation speaks in levels of individual agency, acquiescence, and negotiation.

My utilization of totalitarianism as a concept has a few primary purposes. First, it describes a hyper-intrusive state attempting to control and monitor all aspects of life. Second, totalitarianism reflects the style of blanket-surveillance (*flächendeckend*) that was systemic and endemic in the DDR.³³ This surveillance and paranoia will be explored in later sections on the Stasi. Third, the state and the Stasi had the power to influence and control citizens’ life opportunities, such as acceptance into university or career advancement. As historian Gary

³¹ Ian Kershaw, "Totalitarianism Revisited: Nazism and Stalinism in Comparative Perspective," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für Deutsche Geschichte* 23(1994): 25.

³² *Ibid.*, 30.

³³ Gary Bruce gives uses a similar approach to totalitarianism. See Gary Bruce, *The Firm: The Inside Story of the Stasi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 45.

Bruce posits, “totalitarianism must be understood not as a state consistently exerting control over individuals, but doing so when it needed to.”³⁴ Ultimately, the aim of this intervention and intensive socialization through the educational system, mass-organizations, media, and advertising was the engendering of the “socialist personality,” i.e., an individual that embodied the values of the SED: non-egoism, collectivism, non-materialism, care for others, concern about social justice, and a commitment to progress.³⁵ Fourth, the *Konsum* became a totalitarian space in which employees were both propaganda targets all the while being trained to become propagandists themselves (transmission-belts). These workers were under constant surveillance and pressure to conform to various political demands, such as joining the party, partaking in political meetings, undergoing Marxist-Leninist educational courses at *Konsum* schools, and proselytizing customers to the political slogans of the GDR. Yet, there was much more to the SED-state than simply repression and the state exercising leverage over its citizens; there were also elements of participation that can be construed as elements of a nascent civil society and, of course, the mitigation of totalitarianism.

1.3.4. The appropriation of totalitarianism and selective participation

To distinguish between the aspirations of the SED and the realities of life as reflected in the primary research conducted for this dissertation, I rely on the concept of selective participation as a conceptual counterweight to totalitarianism. This approach illustrates that East Germans determined the ways in which they wanted to participate within state structures to further their own interests. This conceptual framework suggests that the DDR was comprised of individuals, who were free to make decisions about how they participated in society, as well as the state’s political structures (including the régime’s repression apparatus). For that reason,

³⁴ Ibid., 72.

³⁵ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 186.

totalitarianism was never complete, yet the population had to internalize and appropriate the antifascist state narrative in order to “participate.”³⁶ By examining this participation, it will become evident that in spite of the DDR’s blatant democratic shortcomings, citizens were able to influence party-state policies and take part in the wider construction and development of their society. As a result, the relationship between the state and the people was not clearly delineated. Indeed, over a period of forty years, this relationship matured and mutated. For Fulbrook, “The vast majority of East Germans were caught up in a system in which they had to participate; and by virtue of their participation, they were themselves changed. It was thus, in the end, a dictatorship sustained by the actions and interactions of the vast majority of the population.”³⁷

To make a more overarching argument about the East German appropriation of totalitarianism, I maintain that there was a dynamic process in which East Germans developed effective ways of influencing the power structures of the régime to meet their needs, while staying within the confines of the SED state and ideology. In many ways the aim of this dissertation is also to give an alternate view of life and society in the East German dictatorship that demonstrates the tensions between attempted totalitarianism and selective participation. This unique approach allows for wide-ranging deductions and generalizations to be made towards larger questions and themes in regards to the régime’s totalitarian aspirations in ordinary affairs, such as work, consumption, and associational life in East Germany. Despite the constrained and politicized character of their activities, the *Konsum* did preserve niches where citizens could take semi-autonomous actions to meet their own needs and aspirations.³⁸

³⁶ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 4.

³⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 292.

³⁸ Günter Gaus, a German journalist, publicist, diplomat, and politician, advocated the idea that the DDR began to emerge as a “niche society.” From 1945 onward, people retreated to their families, friends, and garden allotments in order to overcome the depravations of attempted totalitarianism, which had a stabilizing effect on the régime. Günter Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1986).

East Germans reacted to the politicization of their daily lives and to state intrusion into their private spheres or niches with a mix of conformity, individual agency, and selective participation.³⁹ Selective participation is a term that describes the ways in which citizens negotiated and responded to the ideological demands of the state in order to create individual space and personal opportunities. Rather than emphasizing popular resistance, selective participation promotes the notion that individuals – behind the facade of conformity – created contexts of individual agency that were often diametrically in contradiction to the will of the state without openly challenging its authority.⁴⁰ This tactic enhanced one's chances of exploiting their given circumstances. In the words of historian Jeannette Madarász, "the strong focus on personal interests affected East German society most severely. It undermined the desired sense of collectivism by concentrating concern on the individual and no longer on the group."⁴¹ She continues: "individualisation, however, does not entail autonomy, emancipation, and limitless self-realisation, but rather a combination of self-determination and dependency on existing conditions."⁴² Indeed, there was a relatively wide range of choices available to citizens for coping with the demands of the state, including various degrees of participation in official party organization and structures.⁴³ Similarly, the *Konsum* also offered its members and consumers a broad set of choices ranging from employment, to cultural, political, and educational

³⁹ Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Way of Life*, trans. William Templer (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 313-14.

⁴⁰ Jan Palmowski, "Between Conformity and *Eigen-Sinn*: New Approaches to GDR History," *German History* 20, no. 4 (2002): 495-97.

⁴¹ Jeannette Z. Madarász, "Economic Politics and Company Culture: The Problem of Routinisation," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalisation of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 74.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Palmowski, "Between Conformity and *Eigen-Sinn*," 501.

opportunities.⁴⁴ As the years passed, selective participation – delineated in the repetitiveness of everyday life – allowed the individual to navigate and apply a wide spectrum of behaviours to, in the words of prominent historian Eric Hobsbawm, “work the system to their advantage – or rather to their minimum disadvantage.”⁴⁵

The DDR was a participatory state. Historians like Fulbrook and Andrew Port have complicated the notion that the DDR’s stability was based on its repressive apparatus. They paint the picture of compulsion from above by uncovering numerous cases of large-scale and voluntary compliance from below. In other words, they point out that millions of East Germans supported the régime on account of their ideological conviction and through sheer opportunism.⁴⁶ My dissertation tries to further complement this perspective. In my view, East Germans had to (ironically) participate in order to attain individual agency; or to put it another way, participation was a prerequisite for building a life in the DDR. Similarly, Fulbrook coined the term ‘honeycomb’ system. For her, there was not a clear-cut distinction between state and society – that is, the DDR was a ‘honeycomb’ system in which ordinary people were connected to the political structures of the state, although they were still free to pursue their individual self-interests, so long as these interests did not conflict with those of the régime. While the populace had curtailed freedoms, it was still able to maintain a give-and-take dialogue and relationship with the régime, which was akin to a nascent civil society. She argues:

The exercise of power was in many areas both far more multifaceted and complex, and also less sinister and repressive... The ‘state’ or the ‘régime’ was not a unitary actor, which simply did (mostly nasty) things to the ill defined, undifferentiated mass of ‘the people.’ There were clearly hugely repressive and utterly reprehensible aspects of the

⁴⁴ Alf Lüdtke, "Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and who are its Practitioners?," in *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Way of Life*, ed. Alf Lüdtke (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4-5.

⁴⁵ E.J. Hobsbawm, "Peasants and politics," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 1, no. 1 (1973): 13.

⁴⁶ Konrad Hugo Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 158.

SED régime; but there were also areas in which thousands of citizens cooperated and felt they were able to pursue common goals and ideals.⁴⁷

Rather than painting a picture of society that was fearful of the SED and its lurking Stasi, Port similarly describes a situation in which workers and farmers regularly made known their needs and concerns to authorities. Like Fulbrook, Port argues that East Germans were not complacent, and they were, in fact, not simply subjects of the régime, but actors with agency.⁴⁸

As will be seen in the sections discussing the Stasi, selective participation also had sinister elements. In this regard, some of Robert Gellately's conclusions, though discussing Nazi Germany, are applicable to the DDR. He suggests that the key element of Gestapo control was the "active participation of 'ordinary' citizens."⁴⁹ This active and opportunistic participation was also a necessary element of Stasi control in the DDR. To further quote Gellately and apply one of his key conclusions to the DDR, "the important ingredient in the terror system – denunciation – was usually determined by private interests and employed for instrumental reasons never intended by the regime."⁵⁰ This notion of negative participation is discussed more fully in sections 8.4.1 and 9.4.1.

1.3.5. Modernity and gender categorization

The SED believed that dictatorial rule was necessary to ensure that modern society avoided political anarchy, economic disintegration, and a return of fascism. During the latter half of the twentieth century, it, like other modern states, underwent drastic changes in cultural, social, and gender roles.⁵¹ In particular, the DDR's bureaucratic administration, its high level of industrialization, its high degree of secularization, its monopolization of the channels of

⁴⁷ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 13.

⁴⁸ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 2.

⁴⁹ Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 130.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵¹ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: xii.

communication and surveillance, its state security system, its single mass party rule – with its binding, all-encompassing ideology, and its inclusion of women in education and wage labour – made the DDR a modern dictatorship, and thus, in many ways, a modern state.⁵² On the basis of these modernistic features, political ideologues in the DDR tried to realize Marx’s vision of a “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” and establish utopia by socially engineering breaks with many older German traditions to create new “socialist personalities.”⁵³

To carry out the SED’s vision of a modern state with modern people, the participation of women in wage-labour and politics was encouraged (though never at the upper levels of the political hierarchy), industrialization and urbanization were promoted, an inclusive education system was established, and opportunities for social mobility were created. Viewing East Germany as modern, according to historian Konrad Jarausch, allows for a more balanced consideration of the achievements of SED rule alongside its failures. However, these modernizing elements were often achieved through state intrusion into the lives of citizens and the repression of certain societal groups, namely those individuals whom the party perceived as capitalistic, fascist, and aristocratic (the *Junker*).⁵⁴

A number of studies address the connection between women, gender, and modernity in East Germany. In *Sex after Fascism*, Dagmar Herzog urges historians to analyze published writings about “sexual practices”⁵⁵ in relation to memory and morality over the forty years of the DDR’s history in order to gain crucial insight into the state’s “alternate modernity.”⁵⁶ Such an examination provides new insights into how the DDR dealt with the Nazi past by constructing

⁵² Kocka, "A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship," 18-21.

⁵³ Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29-30.

⁵⁴ Kocka, "A Special Kind of Modern Dictatorship," 55.

⁵⁵ Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*: 8.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

modernity based upon the newly established gender role of the emancipated and empowered workingwoman. The image of the emancipated women, especially the representation of working mothers, was used by the state to represent the wider success of socialism. The SED purposefully constructed these new roles to garner women's loyalty.⁵⁷

The SED attempted to create a modern state by equating female emancipation and new societal roles for women with modernity. Therefore, as a society, the DDR established symbolic systems by which to represent gender, and, by extension, new symbols, metaphors, and concepts for women to define their identity.⁵⁸ Historian Joan Scott states:

Within these processes and structures, there is room for a concept of human agency as the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society with certain limits and with language – conceptual language that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination.⁵⁹

Furthermore, as seen in archival correspondence between the SED and the *Konsum*, the political ideology of both organizations was laden with gendered concepts that were translated into policy, such as the welfare and protection of women. For this reason, the SED experienced a relatively high level of success in integrating women into education, the workforce, and low to mid-level administrative positions. In fact, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, women may have preferred the DDR's prescription of the female gender categorizations: employed, educated and politically active mothers. This categorization became a primary site of *Ostalgie* (a German term referring to a longing for certain aspects of life in the DDR). Of course, it should be pointed out here that this "emancipation" was, in some ways, an ideological and propagandistic

⁵⁷ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁸ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1063.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 1067.

means of compelling women to participate and invest themselves in the system. This form of emancipation had its successes and is now looked back upon with nostalgia.⁶⁰

Women in West Germany were expected to return to the traditional gender roles of the nurturing mother and caregiver, whereas in the DDR women were required to join the workforce. This is the primary focus of Hildegard Maria Nickel and Eva Kolinsky's study *Reinventing Gender*, where they argue that East German women enjoyed educational and employment advantages in comparison to their contemporaries in the West. As a result, Nickel and Kolinsky characterize East German women as more flexible, mobile, and educated. To use their words, they were "trend-setters with a more modern agenda than that familiar in the West."⁶¹ As they put it, East German women enjoyed a "modernity bonus."⁶² Indeed, if one were to measure modernity through gender equality, women in the DDR enjoyed distinct advantages over their West German counterparts in that they held more vocational and professional qualifications and achieved employment integration. Collectively, Herzog, Nickel, Kolinsky, and Hildegard have argued that the DDR's policy on women was – in many ways – successful.⁶³

The inclusion of women in "societal life" was particularly important for the *Konsum*. However, women were generally underrepresented in industry and production. By the late 1950s, large numbers of women were given some level of on-the-job training, but few had become certified as skilled workers. While there were improvements to their wages, they lagged men behind because of deliberate wage discrimination.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, in order to increase economic productivity and channel women into the industrial workforce, the party dangled

⁶⁰ Grieder, "In Defence of Totalitarianism," 579.

⁶¹ Eva Kolinsky and Hildegard Maria Nickel, *Reinventing Gender: Women in Eastern Germany since Unification* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 17.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 87.

consumption carrots, raised unskilled wages, and added childcare. But in spite of educational opportunities, women remained in low-wage positions and were virtually absent from the East German priority industries of the 1960s: chemicals, optics, and electronics.⁶⁵ Even by 1989, women in the GDR workforce continued to earn twenty-five to thirty percent less than men. The majority of women provided the state with unskilled labour, and many women worked at jobs that were below their qualification. Women were also underrepresented at the highest wage levels and they tended to avoid supervisory functions.⁶⁶ Still, the GDR was a 'working society.' Indeed, with 91 percent of all women active in the labour force in 1988-89, this was as true for women as it was for men.⁶⁷

The image of the emancipated women, especially mothers, was used by the state to represent the wider success of socialism and its modernity. Women were not only ideologically important for the régime, but their economic importance needs to be stressed, for they formed a crucial section of the DDR's workforce.⁶⁸ Women were targeted by the state to work full-time through propaganda, which described full-time employment as a socially and politically necessary. This propaganda, therefore, implies that women who continued to work only part-time were a burden on the state. Furthermore, by providing women with social security and treatment as equals, Erich Honecker, the leader of East Germany from 1971 to 1989, hoped to gain their support.⁶⁹

The state's effort to increase social benefits and the provisions of legal protection for women greatly improved their position in the DDR. These social benefits and the introduction of

⁶⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 314.

⁶⁷ Leonore Ansorg and Renate Hürtgen, "The Myth of Female Emancipation: Contradictions in Women's Lives," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 164.

⁶⁸ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 29.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.

new legal rights, such as the abortion law in 1972, afforded women more freedom to develop greater self-reliance and self-esteem. Moreover, the state's effort to treat women independently removed societal stigmas for single mothers, and they were the chief beneficiaries of the social security policies implemented in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷⁰ But, it needs to be noted, that the state's aim in providing these social benefits was the full-time employment of women.⁷¹ However, these state privileges, although designed to help women, actually reinforced traditional gender roles by reinforcing the role of women as mothers. And by trying to comply with this image, women were increasingly responsible for the policies of the family, thereby upholding and conforming to more traditional expectations. A year's maternity leave also made it difficult for women to achieve equality in the workplace. Unsurprisingly, this was a partial reason for male dominance in high-powered management positions.⁷²

When considered alongside West Germany and other Western societies, the DDR appeared relatively non-modern, especially with its low degree of mass consumption, low quality consumer goods, lack of civil society or public sphere, and the dominance of Marxist-Leninist ideology within economic, political and social institutions.⁷³ On the other hand, what made the DDR particularly modern was its high level of gender equality, sizeable industrialization, extensive focus on technology and science, first-rate educational system, revolutionary social engineering, and its deliberate break from many older traditions. This dissertation, therefore, associates female participation in education and employment with modernity. My

⁷⁰ Following the reunification of Germany, women experienced a revival of traditional gender stereotypes. Generally, women suffered from higher unemployment numbers than other societal groups. Many East German women enjoyed combining family and career, but in united Germany it became more difficult to combine these two aspects, because West Germany did not match the generous provisions for women and mothers. Ibid., 40.

⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

⁷² Ibid., 38-39.

⁷³ Ross, *The East German Dictatorship*: 30.

conceptualization of modernity aligns with the idea of the individual having a measure of agency in the economy and the state.

Finally, the *Konsum* had to portray modern consumption in a modern state. In 1951, for instance, the *Konsum* outlets developed their first self-service checkout installations in order to improve the consumption experience. The policy of self-service became an integral component of the SED's modernisation of consumption. In fact, the new self-service stores were considered proof of the DDR's modernity.⁷⁴ In 1959, the cooperatives planned the opening of 250 self-service stores in an effort to overtake the amount of similar shops in West Berlin.⁷⁵ In October 1959, in celebration of the DDR's tenth anniversary, the SED opened the store *Chemie im Heim* on the prestigious Stalinallee in East Berlin. *Chemie im Heim* was one of the DDR's largest stores, and it was intended to be a showcase of the régime. Moreover, it was to become the model of the modern *Konsum* stores in which customers could touch and select their own items.⁷⁶ Personal consumption will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

1.4. Methodology

The purpose of the archival research and interviews conducted for this dissertation is to demonstrate that there was conformity and there was resistance, often in the same actions and at the same time in ways that were intentionally difficult to disentangle. Since authority and emancipation co-existed, these actions can be interpreted in various ways. Ultimately, it is not the intention of this dissertation to disentangle these things, but rather to show how they were systemically entangled in a society where there were few neutral, autonomous, or completely

⁷⁴ Silke Rothkirch, "„Moderne Menschen kaufen modern“,“ in *Wunderwirtschaft: DDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren* (Köln: Böhlau, 1996), 112-13.

⁷⁵ Andreas Ludwig, ">>Nicht mehr verteilen -- sondern verkaufen<<. Der Konsumhandel in den 50er und frühen 60er Jahren," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar Böhlau, 2006), 31.

⁷⁶ Judd Stitzel, "On the Seam between Socialism and Capitalism: East German Fashion Shows," in *Consuming Germany and the Cold War*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Berg, 2003), 96.

private spaces. The effect of my interpretation and methodology is, therefore, purposefully kaleidoscopic. Of course, I am trying to weigh every piece of evidence with an awareness of the difficulty in knowing the minds of the people who lived in the past from the sources left behind. This notwithstanding, my methodology explains to the reader some possible reasons that certain actors either avoided or engaged in actions that were somehow participatory and system-sustaining, while individualistically opposed to the power structures of the East German dictatorship.

1.4.1. Interviews

Although archival documents and secondary sources paint a vivid picture of the régime's use of the *Konsum* as a political tool for the purposes of garnering support for the emerging socialist political and economic institutions (i.e., indoctrination) from the SBZ/DDR, I can only speculate as to how the population reacted to this indoctrination. For this reason, I have conducted interviews with East Germans to illustrate their experiences of interacting with the *Konsum*. Though extremely useful, the interview as a research source has its own unique shortcomings. Over the years, memories of a certain period of time in one's life tend to fade or become idealized. In addition, interviewees may have their own motivations for portraying a certain image of their lived experience. As historian Dagmar Herzog suggests, "Each memory was always an interpretation, mixing kernels of truth about the past with powerful emotional investments that had much to do with an evolving present."⁷⁷ This was definitely the case during an interview with a *Konsum* administrator from the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Bezirk-Suhl* in which he was particularly nostalgic for the DDR. In another interview with a low ranking *Konsum* employee, she only reluctantly spoke of these times and her experiences with working

⁷⁷ Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*: 8.

in the *Konsum*. Her employment was described as “a means to earn money – nothing more.”⁷⁸ Yet, in other official and unofficial conversations, people working within the *Konsum* indicated that there was a special culture or *Bewusstsein* (consciousness) associated with the co-operative organization.⁷⁹ Furthermore, they stressed that the *Konsum* was somehow different than the state-run retail organization (*Handelsorganisation*).⁸⁰

In his recent study on the Stasi titled *The Firm*, historian Gary Bruce draws his evidence primarily from interviews. When describing some of the pitfalls of oral history, he notes “human memory is not a still photograph of a bygone era but a never-ending collage of images, constantly tweaked by the circumstances of the present.”⁸¹ He continues:

It is deeply rooted in humans to remember personal aspects of their life rather than broader historical developments. Naturally, East Germans today remember their vacations on the Baltic, their first love, hikes in Thuringia, the view from the TV Tower in East Berlin, meeting under the World Clock at Alexanderplatz, rather than the order to shoot at the Berlin Wall. There is a self-defence mechanism at play against what appears to East Germans to be a suggestion that because the country in which they lived was the country of the Stasi and the Wall, their triumphs, achievements, personal relationships, even their lives were all for naught... Because East Germans recall living a “normal life” does not mean that the régime must therefore have been benign, ordinary, and normal, but rather suggests that the passage of time alters our memories of what once was, especially in Germany where many unfulfilled post-unification aspirations have certainly affected views of the DDR.⁸²

In a similar vein, Roland Jahn, the current director of the Stasi Archive, stated in a 2011 interview with *Der Spiegel* (a popular German weekly):

⁷⁸ Author's interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Vorstandsmitglied - Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

⁸⁰ The state trade organization *Handelsorganisation* (HO) was a network of retail stores established in November 1948. In these stores, East Germans had the opportunity to buy (un)rationed goods, albeit at very high prices. The result of these price discrepancies between the *Konsum* and the HO engendered a two-tiered retail system. These stores served two purposes: they soaked up additional cash that was circulating in the DDR through piecework and higher wages; and they served as a key advertisement for the régime by displaying concrete proof of the improvements in everyday life and showing off the promise of consumer plenty. The HO competed with the *Konsum*; however, the HO did not survive the *Wende*.

⁸¹ Bruce, *The Firm*: 146.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 9.

The sun also shines in a dictatorship. Everyone has his or her personal memories. Many think that because they experienced the DDR in this way, that's how it actually was. But, this is not correct. There were actually both: prison in Hohenschönhausen and nudism on the Baltic Sea. I understand the different vantage points. Even within my own family there were differing perspectives of the DDR. My mother always thought that when someone was arrested there was a reason for it – that is, until her son was arbitrarily arrested.⁸³

After conducting a number of interviews, I recognize that the range of opinion and tone is as complex and diverse as those experienced by Ronald Jahn and those described by historian Gary Bruce.

I will refer to interviews conducted with Ulrich Fitzkow (a former civil engineer in the DDR); Dr. Burchard Bösche (an executive within the Hamburg based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*); Martin Bergner (a former *Konsum* employee and economist in the DDR and the current spokesperson for the Berlin based Zentralkonsum – the successor of the VDK); as well as a former *Konsum* saleswomen and a former DDR school teacher who have both chosen to remain anonymous. The information gleaned from these interviews underscores the tensions that existed from experiencing both the positive and negative aspects of life in the DDR. Mention should be made that East Germans tend to tell stories between the lines and through intonation, pauses, and tone. This is essentially an unofficial commentary in which meaning has to be drawn from not necessarily what is said, but rather what is not being said. For this reason, it can be difficult for a foreigner to capture a complete understanding of the nuances employed by the interviewee. Caution is, therefore, the foundation for my critical evaluation of interviews and archival evidence.

Three of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in Stendal, Hamburg, and Berlin. I recorded and transcribed each of these interviews. The interviewee then had the chance to either make additions, revisions, or withdraw from participation in this project. Due to distance and

⁸³ Roland Jahn, "'Eine Schule der Demokratie'," *Der Spiegel* 28 March 2011, 32.

time constraints, the interviews with Herr Bergner and the anonymous *Konsum* worker were conducted through mail correspondence (interview questions can be seen in Appendix 11.3). The process for selecting interviews was admittedly unscientific; rather, figuratively speaking, a “snowball effect” was used that started with Herr Fitzkow. He then recommended that I contact the anonymous schoolteacher and the process continued from there. These interviews were carried out in accordance with the guidelines and approval of the Research Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan. All of the interviewees were given a choice to use their actual names, a pseudonym, or to remain anonymous. They all gave their written permission to participate in this project. Thanks to their participation, the interviewees have added a human element to this work. And, since they were caught up in the dramas of these events, I have tried to quote them as much as possible to draw attention to the complexities of the choices they had to make in their daily lives, and the often difficult and opaque nature of the situations with which they were confronted. In so doing, I hope that I have avoided the arrogance of moral judgements, especially since I am an outsider and non-German who never experienced having to live under the SED dictatorship.

1.4.2. Archival research

I was drawn to study the *Konsum* because of its ubiquity, voluntary mass-membership, predominantly female workforce, propaganda role, and the masses of “paper” this organization left behind in various archives throughout the former East Germany. Specifically, this dissertation rests almost exclusively on research and evidence gathered from various state, city, and regional archives throughout the former East German state. From the archive of the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (**SAPMO-DDR**) I have utilized the files of the *Abteilung Handel und Versorgung, Büro Werner Jarowinsky 1963-1989, Sekretariat*

Paul Merker, and the *Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik*. The Archiv Konsumverband in Berlin (AKB) holds the co-operative newspaper *Der Konsumgenossenschaftler* and *Eingaben der Bevölkerung* (formal complaints made in written or verbal form directed at any party official or governing body, including the *Konsum*). The Sächsisches Wirtschaftsarchiv (SWA) is a regional archive in Leipzig. It houses the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* from 1884 to 1990 and the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Zwickau* from 1873 to 1990. In Berlin, the East German secret police archive, *Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes* (BStU or **Stasi Archive**), contains files regarding the infiltration of the Stasi into the *Konsum* workforce and Stasi observations of consumption and consumers within *Konsum* stores in order to gauge the mood of the population. The Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig (SSL), Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz (SSC), Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Meiningen (TSM), and Landesarchiv Berlin (LAB) have been utilized to analyze urban, rural and regional circumstances. More importantly, the aim of using archives throughout the former East German state has been to demonstrate the wide reach of the *Konsum* to nearly every community within the state. For more information on the archives and their collections, see section 12.1 in the bibliography.

1.4.3. Interpretation of archival materials

East German archival documents are comprised of what can either be described as East German language or *DDR Deutsch*. They include mundane reports about the supply situations in individual retail outlets; correspondence between the various administrative branches; photos of the work place and shop window displays; *Eingaben* or protest letters; and various *Konsum* publications. These documents not only reflect the *Konsum*'s various political and economic roles, but also demonstrate the ways in which the SED was making concerted efforts to control this organization. While archival sources describe the larger political and economic processes of

the Cold War, the historian has to wade through a great deal of politicized treacle or jargon to find the valuable discourse. More specifically, the esoteric language in these documents was couched in what George Orwell might have described as “Newspeak” or “a medium of expressions for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of [East German socialism].”⁸⁴ In short, these documents demonstrate that the population developed and learned patterns of accepted behaviour for the specific purpose of either avoiding confrontation with the authorities, or manipulating governmental and party institutions to their advantage. The population would generally assess the political implication of a given situation and then employ the appropriate behaviours as well as respond in ideologically couched vernacular. As archival sources indicate, communication between the SED and the *Konsum* included specific language that was unique to the ideological discourse of the DDR. With the continuous presence of propaganda, slogans, and acceptable terms, the language of socialism became at least partially internalized. This internalisation of ideology was a requisite for maintaining membership and attaining promotion within the *Konsum* and, more broadly, for functioning in the ideologically charged daily interactions in the SBZ/DDR. Historian Stephen Kotkin has described this process as “learning to speak socialism.”⁸⁵

The communications between the party and the *Konsum* may (merely) be construed as evidence of functionaries paying lip-service to the party in order to advance their own position, and thus these documents may not necessarily reflect the dominance of the party; instead, they may be what the political scientist James C. Scott defines as the “public transcript” (i.e., the open and public interaction between subordinates and the ruling elite). If the armed wing of the state is particularly threatening (as was the case in the DDR), then the subordinate will seek to

⁸⁴ George Orwell, “Appendix,” in *1984* (London: Penguin, 2008).

⁸⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

incorporate the rituals of the ruling caste; or as Scott states “the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask.”⁸⁶ In these public situations (parades, party rallies, internal party communication, etc.), there may be convincing evidence for the hegemony of the dominant discourse, and the subordinate group is actually an enthusiastic partner in its subordination.⁸⁷ More likely, however, these *Konsum* functionaries learned the “rules of the game” by internalizing the language of the SED discourse, all the while maintaining hegemonic appearances through performances of the “public transcript” that were often for the purpose of self-preservation and self-advancement, while avoiding the SBZ/DDR’s Orwellian security services. Scott puts it this way:

The slaves who artfully reinforced their master’s stereotyped view of them as shiftless and unproductive may well have thereby lowered the work norms expected of them. By their artful praise at celebrations and holidays, they may have won better food rations and clothing allowances. The performance is often collective, as subordinates collude to create a piece of theatre that serves their superior’s view of the situation but that is maintained in their own interests.⁸⁸

By applying Scott’s methodology to the reading of archival sources, one can draw the general conclusion that the functionaries of the *Konsum* were simply acknowledging the party’s truth (*Partei-Wahrheit* or simply what they assumed state officials wanted to hear) as an evasive tactic without necessarily being invested in the performance.

The works of Foucault have heavily influenced my analysis of archival sources. His famous dictum “where there is power, there is resistance... These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network” is applicable to a study of the DDR for signifying and

⁸⁶ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 2.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

expressing that totalitarianism was often resisted and negotiated.⁸⁹ For this reason, I try to consider archival sources with something of a Foucauldian and perhaps even poststructuralist approach to discourse. Foucault dismisses the possibility of “an attempt at totalitarian periodization, whereby from a certain moment and for a certain time, everyone would think in the same, in spite of surface differences, say the same thing through a polymorphous vocabulary, and produce a sort of great discourse that one could travel over in any direction.”⁹⁰ Yet, to a certain degree, this actually seemed to have occurred in the DDR, since an entirely new set of meanings, knowledge, and discourse (much of which was borrowed from the Soviet Union) was imposed on a less than receptive German population. In my view, the state and the citizenry were able to reproduce the existing meanings of knowledge and discourse to advance their position in relation to the other, while not necessarily being invested in the performance. To make sense of this, I base my archival analysis on the following questions Foucault raises in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*:

Who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who – alone – have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such discourse?⁹¹

By asking these questions, it becomes apparent that in the DDR there was a corpus of statements that were in continual circulation within its hermetically sealed borders. Both the “top” and “bottom” of DDR society understood the rules as to when particular statements could and should be uttered.⁹² From the bottom, communication and discourse with the régime had to be

⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage books ed., vol. I (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 95.

⁹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 1969), 165.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 30-31.

generated individually and in isolation from others, since a collective approach would have been interpreted by the régime as a challenge to its authority. Moreover, the sites from which the state produced its discourse and verbal performances were ubiquitous. In the context of this dissertation, they included advertising, consumption, employment, the police, schools, and the physical spaces of the *Konsum* stores and restaurants.⁹³ Hence, as an institution involved in these said sites, the *Konsum* was helping the state produce new forms of knowledge and discourse and became an Ideological State Apparatus (**ISA**).

Louis Althusser, a French Marxist philosopher, formulated the notion of ISAs as institutions that produce and reproduce meanings of the dominant ideology. To directly quote him, “ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.”⁹⁴ Ideology, in other words, is not only the ideas that legitimize the rule of the dominant class, but also the systems by which the ruling class promulgates these ideas to justify its rule. According to him, the most apparent ISAs were religion, the family, the unions, the media, sport, literature, and, most importantly, education. These institutions aim to secure consent for a given social order or mode of production on both a conscious and unconscious level. On the basis of this definition, and since the *Konsum* functioned on the level of the educational, economic, political, communicative, and ideological, there is a relatively clear parallel between it and an ISA.⁹⁵

To give a general definition, ideology entails the dissemination of values, knowledge, ideas, norms, and rules (i.e., culture) from the dominant party-class to the subordinate class of subjects. It is for these reasons that the *Konsum* is a worthwhile subject of historical analysis,

⁹³ Ibid., 56-57.

⁹⁴ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 1970), 32.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 17.

especially since the documents it produced reflect the meanings and values that were in circulation under SED rule. And, since co-operatives in this area of Germany were one of the organizations that were in existence prior to the DDR and continue to exist to this day, these shifts in meanings and values become readily apparent. To make a further point, as subjects and destinations of SED ideology, the *Konsum* archival documents further demonstrate that East Germans were able to produce and reproduce the appropriate and accepted signifiers and discourse during their communications with the régime.⁹⁶

The subjects, in turn, process and transform the given ideology into a range of meaningful behaviour, including incorporating it into the process of forming an identity in line with the terms, meanings, and categories of SED ideology (I am worker; I am a member of the proletariat, a working mother, and so on).⁹⁷ As in all social contexts, it can be concluded that the subject is the embodiment of the meanings of the given ideology. However, in the DDR, there were avenues of resistance by which behaviours could have been carried out to give the appearance of conventional conformity in order to allow the subject to resist in ways that were paradoxically and simultaneously conformist and oppositional.

Archival sources also reveal tensions between attempted totalitarianism and selective participation. On one level, for example, they demonstrate that Stasi involvement in the *Konsum* and wider East German society was a common, albeit negative, form of participation that had totalitarian undertones. On the other hand, Stasi involvement was also used for personal gain and was a form of, albeit negative, selective participation. Take, for instance, the case of a Stasi informant codenamed Max. In 1956, by gaining the trust of the Stasi, Max was able to travel to West Berlin, as well as to acquire monetary bonuses. However, Max used his experiences in

⁹⁶ Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34-39.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

West Berlin to organize an escape to the West not only for himself, but also for nine others from his hometown. In other words, he used his connection with the Stasi to achieve personal ends.⁹⁸ As in the case of Max and other informants cited in this dissertation, the very systems that the state, the Stasi, and the *Konsum* established, while having characteristics of totalitarianism, could be manipulated for advancing one's interests. Hence, historian Gary Bruce posits, "The informant network had a built-in element of denunciation for personal gain."⁹⁹ Ultimately, *Eingaben* or Stasi reports demonstrate that East Germans actively participated in, resisted, and manipulated the structures that dominated them. As in the case of Max, resistance and conformity were often part of the same action, although in ways that were intentionally difficult to disentangle.

It is in light of the works of Foucault, Scott, and Althusser that I have interpreted archival material. These works remind one that the *Konsum* and SED policies were never seamlessly implemented. Indeed, people interpreted, negotiated, and mediated SED policies and discourse on a daily basis, and different actors put them into practice to their own advantage, or simply resisted and avoided them whenever they did not meet their economic interests. While a picture emerges in which co-operatives were a subservient political and propaganda tool of the party, the actual political and propaganda functions of the *Konsum* in practice are often difficult to determine. Documents and publications produced by the *Konsum* and the SED were often tainted with the personal views and preferences of the writer, which unsurprisingly led to highly subjective analyses that could have put individuals in great danger of being characterized as politically unreliable. Indeed, Fulbrook is correct which she states, "archives lie." She continues, "All historical documents, from whatever historical context, are artefacts of particular

⁹⁸ Bruce, *The Firm*: 102.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

motives and situations, written with certain intentions and audiences in mind; they must therefore be the subject of appropriate evaluation and interpretation.”¹⁰⁰ With this in mind, I have conducted my archival research. In my view, the documents are still extremely useful and demonstrate the politicized nature of SED rule and the infusion of ideology into the most mundane aspects of everyday life.

1.5. East German historiography (secondary sources)

In his article loosely translated as *Consumer Co-operatives in the Soviet Zone and the DDR: Hypotheses of a little explored research field*, historian Ulrich Kurzer suggests that historians need to continue to examine and somehow measure the societal influence and importance of the *Konsum*. He further proposes future avenues of research, such as the connection between consumer satisfaction with the stability of the régime; the possibilities for women in respect to political and economic participation; and the extent to which *Konsum* personnel interacted with the Stasi.¹⁰¹ This dissertation attempts to answer these questions and fill in these gaps within East German historiography.

1.5.1. Consumption

Mark Landsman’s *Dictatorship and Demand* explores the ways in which central state ministries and planning authorities interpreted and attempted to fulfill the party’s and the general population’s call for greater access to higher-quality consumer goods.¹⁰² To that end, Landsman primarily argues that the SED was unable to reconcile its ideologically driven imperative to boost Soviet-style “productivism” through heavy industry (i.e., big construction projects, steel

¹⁰⁰ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR, 1949-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

¹⁰¹ Ulrich Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR: Hypothesen zu einem bisher wenig beachteten Forschungsfeld," *Deutschland Archiv* 32, no. 5 (1999): 815-23.

¹⁰² Mark Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand: The Politics of Consumerism in East Germany* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005).

and machine building) with light industry (i.e., consumer goods and services) was disregarded and viewed with the scorn of being “non-productive.” It was only with antithetical pressure from below and competition with West Germany that light industry became such a concern for the SED. With that said, the SED could not win in this Cold War contest with West Germany’s prosperity, nor could it meet the increasing demand of its citizens. Similarly, as Judd Stitzel demonstrates in his book *Fashioning Socialism*,¹⁰³ the DDR failed to create an alternative consumer culture based on socialist ideals. He also traces power relationships that were inherent in the exchange and circulation of goods and reinforces the importance of women in the realm of consumption in DDR society. He describes “the category of gender in a broader narrative of political, economic, social, and cultural history.”¹⁰⁴ As Jonathan Zatlin in *The Currency of Socialism* aptly argues, East Germans judged the performance of the régime through its ability – or perhaps more fitting, inability – to provide the populace with consumer goods.¹⁰⁵ Combined, these three studies draw wider connections between political, economic, and social considerations. They stress that the failure of the East German régime was based on the command economy’s failure to satisfy the ever-increasing consumption demands of its citizens. Finally, these works demonstrate that consumption represented an exceedingly important interaction between ordinary people and the DDR’s command economy. Therefore, due in part to the SED failing to make a viable socialist consumer culture, the citizenry ultimately turned against the party in 1989. Of course, restriction on information and the general dictatorial structures also played a role in the collapse of the state, but all of this falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

¹⁰³ Judd Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics, and Consumer Culture in East Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰⁵ Jonathan R. Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

1.5.2. Varying interpretations of the *Konsum*

There are various interpretations of the roles that the *Konsum* played in the DDR. For many citizens, the *Konsum* was nothing more than a chain of retail shops. My interpretation departs from this conception, however, because I argue that this organization was highly political.

The picture of the *Konsum* that Wilhelm Kaltenborn produces in his work, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*, was based largely on the literal interpretation of co-operative statutes. Within these statutes, there was clearly a mix of SED political and economic rhetoric, as well as traditional co-operative ideology, thereby engendering misinterpretation of the exact role of the *Konsum* in DDR society. In actual practice, as Kaltenborn suggests, these statutes did not translate into political obligations for the co-operative members. Although there were political and ideological elements within the organization, there was no political expulsion of any members. For Kaltenborn, this is an especially important point, since he argues that as a mass-organization the *Konsum* was not especially effective, and this organization was by no means a “transmission-belt” of party ideology. Furthermore, he also reaches the conclusion that the DDR co-operatives were *not* part of the state repression apparatus, nor were they instruments of state paternalism and party indoctrination.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, Kaltenborn is under the impression that the *Konsum* was primarily an independent and private enterprise during the DDR. Here, I disagree and attempt to argue that the *Konsum* was largely under state control. Of course, Kaltenborn’s interpretation may be influenced by and reflective of his current position within the executive of the *Zentralkonsum* (the successor of the DDR consumer co-operative organization).

¹⁰⁶ Wilhelm Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme: Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR - Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme* (Berlin Institut für Genossenschaftswesen an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 2002), 63.

Historian Brett Fairbairn's interpretation of the *Konsum* is markedly different from that of Kaltenborn. For Fairbairn, the 1950s was a period in which East German co-operatives were subjected to the increasing authority of state controls, as they became more and more centralized. This increased centralization meant that influential positions, especially in management, were given to SED party members. Consequently, the co-operative governing apparatus was almost completely subordinate to the SED, with its members in control of eighty to ninety percent of the senior management positions. These SED party members within the co-operatives kept files on the political activities of their subordinates, and active party support became a primary credential for hiring or promotion. Co-operatives, like other "democratic" mass-organizations, were expected to demonstrate loyalty to the SED by acknowledging the primary position of the party within the DDR. In effect, as Fairbairn maintains, co-operatives became "transmission-belts" that conveyed the party's influence to wider circles of the population that otherwise may not have been within the direct reach of the SED.¹⁰⁷ In his work, he alludes to themes and ideas, such as the autonomy of the consumer co-operatives under the SED dictatorship and the role of women in the *Konsum*. Fairbairn also touches upon the nature of SED rule in respect to gender, state-citizen relations, and participation.

Fairbairn's work focuses on the period of 1945 to 1955 and compares and contrasts postwar co-operative development in both East and West Germany, whereas my work focuses solely on the *Konsum* during the entire lifespan of the SBZ/DDR. Similarly, this dissertation builds and expands upon the ideas Fairbairn outlines with a few key differences. In my view, the *Konsum* was more inclusive of women in the realms of education and upper-management than Fairbairn argues (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 9). In this respect, I go so far as to use terms such

¹⁰⁷ Brett Fairbairn, "Popular Participation and Political Cultures: Co-operative Enterprises and the State in the Two Germanies, 1945-1990" (paper presented at the German Studies Association, 1998), 6.

as progressive or even emancipatory to describe the *Konsum*. I also paint a picture of the *Konsum* as a broad and participatory mass-organization that successfully reached its targeted segments of the population (*Zielgruppen*): women, youth, and rural inhabitants. In these respects, this dissertation contributes and adds to Fairbairn's work, while still functioning as a piece of independent scholarship.

This dissertation is also influenced by the work of historian Katherine Pence. Similar to Fairbairn, she focuses almost exclusively on the postwar period (at least in her publications to date) and compares and contrasts capitalist versus socialist consumption in West and East Germany in order to tease out wider conclusions about the constructions of gender roles in the newly emerging German states. Pence only nominally explores the *Konsum*; instead, she examines the HO in considerable detail. With that said, Pence makes a few key points about East German consumer culture that I continually refer to and substantiate in my examination of the *Konsum*. First, she argues, "the trumpeting of DDR success set a standard of achievement that put the régime in a difficult position since the juxtaposition of abundant displays and bold promises with concomitant economic failings made the discrepancy between promise and reality increasingly glaring, especially with the West next door."¹⁰⁸ I build upon and substantiate this argument in Chapters 7 and 8. Second, I draw on the idea that the state attempted to establish a satisfactory consumer culture as a way to legitimize its rule. As Pence suggests, "the SED recognized that alleviating consumer crises and building a viable consumer culture would be one

¹⁰⁸ Katherine Pence, "The Myth of a Suspended Present: Prosperity's Painful Shadow in 1950s East Germany," in *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History*, ed. Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 157.

key to gaining and maintaining power.”¹⁰⁹ Again, this connection between consumerism and state-legitimacy is a theme throughout this dissertation.

Besides Fairbairn, Pence, and Kaltenborn, other recent scholarship demonstrates the growing vibrancy of the field of socialist consumer culture. Andreas Ludwig at the *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* in Eisenhüttenstadt and Ina Merkel at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg have published many works pertaining to East German consumption that directly and indirectly deal with consumer co-operatives.¹¹⁰ Yet, Thomas Adam and Stefan Jaunich argue that “in spite of their size and scale, an overview of the East German co-operative movement is not readily available, and the development of the co-operative system in the DDR remains largely *terra incognita*.”¹¹¹ Jan Bösche echoes this contention by suggesting “there are many potential research possibilities through an examination of the role of the consumer co-operatives in the former DDR. On the one hand, they were tightly bound to the system; on the other hand, there were diverse forms of open and veiled resistance within these consumer co-operatives.”¹¹² Additionally, Witho Holland’s recent publication about East German consumer co-operatives entitled *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR: Rechtliche*

¹⁰⁹ Katherine Pence, "Shopping for an 'Economic Miracle': Gendered Politics of Consumer Citizenship in Divided Germany," in *Shopping for an 'Economic Miracle': Gendered Politics of Consumer Citizenship in Divided Germany*, ed. Alain Chatriot, Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, and Matthew Hilton (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 111.

¹¹⁰ See Andreas Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR* ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar Böhlau, 2006). Ludwig, "Vom Dorfkonsum zum >>Komplexen System der Landversorgung<<."

For some of Ina Merkel’s important works on consumption and socialist consumerism See Ina Merkel, "The GDR -- A Normal Country in the Centre of Europe " in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalization of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009). Ina Merkel, ">> Wer nie vorm Konsum Schlange stand...<<," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR* ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar Böhlau 2006). Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis: Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* (Weimar Böhlau Verlag, 1999).

¹¹¹ Thomas Adam and Stefan Jaunich, "Die Leipziger Bau- und Konsumgenossenschaften. Ein sozialdemokratisches Traditionsmilieu in der NS-Zeit und der frühen DDR," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* (2000): 201-02.

¹¹² Jan Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90: Von der Plan- zur Marktwirtschaft am Beispiel der Genossenschaft Sachsen-Nord/Eilenburg* (Hamburg: Heinrich-Kaufmann-Stiftung des Zentralverbandes deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.V. , 2007), 64.

und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung is a useful study.¹¹³ He effectively examines the legal and structural relationship between the state and the *Konsum*. My contribution to the field is to take his work one step further by discussing the relationship between the state, the *Konsum*, and the people and analyze how and why people participated in the *Konsum*.

The consumer co-operatives – founded at the onset of the Soviet occupation – constituted a significant part of the economic, social, cultural, political, and gendered history of the DDR. It is my intent that this dissertation will make an original contribution to these areas of East German historiography. While the literature mentioned in this section is helpful and connects to important historical debates about the nature of East German society, and the degree of “totalitarian” control, it is surprising – given the *Konsum*’s size and political importance – that relatively little academic study of the consumer co-operatives has yet been done in English and German.¹¹⁴ To speculate, there may be a few reasons for this. First, historians, as well as the general East German public, have tended to perceive the *Konsum* as simply a retail and

¹¹³ Witho Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR: Rechtliche und wirtschaftliche Entwicklung* (Marburg Institut für Genossenschaftswesen an der Philipps-Universität Marburg, 2008).

¹¹⁴ For English sources on the co-operative movement See: Fairbairn, Brett. "Co-operative Values and the Cold War: The Rebuilding and Undermining of the German Consumer Movement, 1945-1955." *Annals of Public and Co-operative Economics* 71, no. 4 (2000): 637-63; B. Fairbairn, 2000. *Community Values, Democratic Cultures? Reflections on Saxony's Place in the German Co-operative Movement, 1849-1933 in Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933*, ed. James Retallack (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), pp. 180-195; B. Fairbairn, 1999. *The Rise and Fall of Consumer Co-operation in Germany*. In Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (eds.), *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Co-operation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 267-302. On the earlier history of German consumer co-operatives See B. Fairbairn, 2004. "Self-Help and Philanthropy: the Emergence of Co-operatives in Britain, Germany, the United States, and Canada from the Mid-Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century." In *Philanthropy, Patronage, and Civil Society: Experiences from Germany, Great Britain, and North America*, ed. by Thomas Adam. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, pp. 55-78; B. Fairbairn, 2003. "Membership, Organization, and Wilhelmine Modernism: Construction of Economic Democracy through Co-operation." In *Wilhelminism and its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meaning of Reform, 1890-1930*, eds. Geoff Eley and James Retallack. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 34-50.

For some general publications on the on the East German co-operative movement See: B. Fairbairn, 1998. *Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik 1945 bis 1990*. *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 34, 2, June 1998, 171-198. Manfred Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten* (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag 2004). Adam and Jaunich, "Die Leipziger Bau- und Konsumgenossenschaften." Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*.

distribution chain.¹¹⁵ Second, an historian interviewed for this project indicated that historians have to use language that supports and subscribes to the current German narrative to secure state funding for research, namely that the East German state was a brutal and oppressive dictatorship that needed to be colonized by the West. Moreover, in 1994, the recently enlarged Federal Republic of Germany (*Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, **BRD**) passed a resolution officially recognizing the totalitarian characteristics of SED rule. In other words, historical works on the DDR serve as binaries to the narrative of the Western democratic functions of the BRD.¹¹⁶

Before moving onto Part I, it is worth a little last-minute reflection to re-state and clarify my thesis, conceptualization, and objectives more succinctly. Above all, this study attempts to provide new understandings of the ways in which the party's actions affected its citizens, and the ways in which citizens responded to, averted, and manipulated the SED's attempted total politicization of their daily lives. The concept of attempted totalitarianism is appropriate, for the SED undertook the unrealizable goal of attaining the complete ideological subordination of the population. The SED attempted to achieve this subordination through the total control of all aspects of individual life and social processes. However, selective participation undermined the state's attempts at totalitarian control as people came to terms with the constrained parameters of life in the DDR, and they came to understand that the proper forms of participation would enable them to further their own interests and aspirations, while avoiding the more repressive aspects of the régime. Specifically, I will explore the range of potential participation the *Konsum* gave to its employees and consumers. This dissertation further rests on the argument that the SED hijacked (i.e., "democratically centralized") and used the *Konsum* as a tool to bring the

¹¹⁵ Hermann Schwenger, "Konsumgenossenschaften," in *SBZ-Handbuch. Staatliche Verwaltungen, Parteien, gesellschaftlicher Organisationen und ihre Führungskräfte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschland 1945-1949*, ed. Martin Broszat and Hermann Weber (Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1993), 778.

¹¹⁶ Grieder, "In Defence of Totalitarianism," 567-68.

consuming public into a space of surveillance and observation while eliminating the black market and private retail. To this end, the study has drawn attention to the Stasi's incursion into the mundane aspects of everyday life in the realms of education, work, and consumption. This dissertation will, moreover, examine the various political, economic, propagandistic, communicative, and educational roles of the *Konsum*, while alluding to the nature of power relations, Soviet-style socialism, and the tensions between totalitarian elements of the socialist construction in East Germany. By employing this unique approach and as the first full-length study on the *Konsum*, it is my hope that this piece of work will be an original and valuable contribution to the historiography of the SBZ (1945 to 1949) and the DDR (1949 to 1990).

PART I: CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE

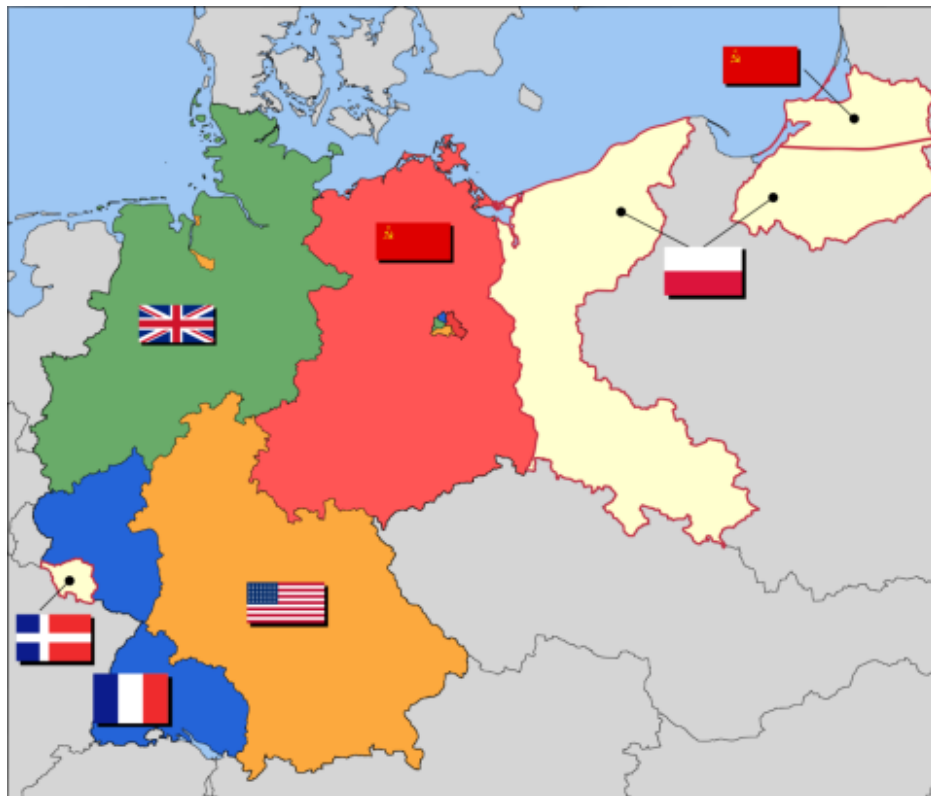
2. The historical foundations of the *Konsum*, 1945 to 1990

The cooperatives in the SBZ/GDR became a mass-organization in which people were subjected to a communication and educational process that was to teach the socialist way of working and living.

- Historian Gerhard Rönnebeck¹¹⁷

The purpose of co-operatives in a social market economy is to further the interests of their members; the purpose of socialist co-operatives is to fulfill state objectives; the self-administration typical for co-operatives is replaced by state-decreed targets... They [East German Consumer Co-operatives] were fully integrated in the central command economy; the wholesale and intermediate sale prices were state-fixed.

- Historians Gunther Aschhoff and Eckart Henningsen¹¹⁸



Map 2: The division of Germany and Berlin at the end of World War II in 1945 (the Soviet Occupation Zone and the borders of the future East Germans state are in red)¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Gerhard Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR -- eine kritische Analyse* (Berlin: Institut für Genossenschaftswesen an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 1994), 11-12.

¹¹⁸ Gunther Aschhoff and Eckart Henningsen, *The German Cooperative System: Its History, Structure and Strength* (Frankfurt am Main: Fritz Knapp Verlag, 1996), 43-45.

¹¹⁹ Map-Germany-1945, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map-Germany-1945.svg>, (August 2012).

When the Soviets re-established consumer co-operatives in eastern Germany for food distribution and reconstruction, they were reaching back to pre-war structures and traditions to address present-day problems. Consumer co-operatives had a significant history prior to the Second World War that made them highly relevant to both the economic and political challenges of the postwar era. Co-operatives are "autonomous associations of persons united voluntarily to meet their economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise."¹²⁰ In Germany such small-scale self-help enterprises began to emerge around the middle of the 19th century under the overall leadership of Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch (mainly for more urban, artisanal, and liberal co-operatives) and Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (for more rural, agrarian, and conservative ones). While consumer co-operatives existed in those early decades, they really took off beginning in the 1880s-1890s when they began to develop a following among urban Social Democratic workers. Large stores in Dresden, Leipzig, and Berlin (in the east) and Hamburg (in the west) led the way. These working-class associations thrived in the 1920s in loose affiliation with the Social Democrats and trade unions, but sometimes also were led by activists from Germany's then-new Communist Party. The National Socialists took over the co-operatives and eventually amalgamated them into the Nazi labour organization called the German Labour Front. However, twelve years of Nazi rule did not wipe out generations of working-class traditions, so the co-operatives were re-established in both eastern and western Germany under Allied rule after the war. The re-establishment in the Soviet zone was especially swift and decisive; indeed, the rebuilding of the *Konsum* network and central organization preceded the creation of the East German state in 1949. From the beginning in 1945, the co-operatives were places where Germans – socialists,

¹²⁰ Ian MacPherson, *Co-operative Principles for the 21st Century* (Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance, 1996).

communists, and others – could work with the Soviet occupiers to ensure local needs were met. The occupying authorities (and after them the DDR and its ruling party, the SED) in turn took an interest in the political affiliations and loyalty of the co-operative activists and leaders.

This chapter includes a general history of East Germany from 1945 to 1990 in order to provide a historical point of reference for the reader. And since this chapter moves from one historical development to the next, constant explanation will be given to the reader as to why a particular event is important and relevant to understanding the *Konsum*. There are also continual references made to other chapters that give more explicit explanation of the topic at hand. All of this is done to maintain a logical thread that connects the reader to changes in political developments and climate and their impact on the *Konsum*. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is not to provide the reader with an historical survey of the DDR; rather, it is to highlight and introduce the key events that are relevant for an understanding of the *Konsum*.¹²¹

2.1. Chronology of the DDR and its impact on the *Konsum*

The aim of this section is to highlight key domestic and international events that influenced the *Konsum* and its members. It will introduce the reader to historical periods that will be referred to in later chapters. Since there was a gradual evolution in the development of society in the DDR, this section highlights historical shifts in East Germany. As is evidenced in later chapters, it is apparent that the *Konsum* and its members were directly influenced by the SED's ideological shifts and the wider political fortunes of the state.

¹²¹ For general surveys on East German history See Archie Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism* (London: Bodley Head, 2009); Bruce, *The Firm*; Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945-1955* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); David Childs and Richard J. Popplewell, *The Stasi: The East German Intelligence and Security Service* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (New York: Longman, 2000); Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008: The Divided Nation*, Third ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*; Ulrich Mählert, *Kleine Geschichte der DDR* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck 2009); Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Gareth Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945-53: From antifascism to Stalinism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

2.1.1. The SMAD – May 1945 to October 1949

The Soviets created an administration system on 6 June 1945 called the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland*, **SMAD**) to establish their political and economic objectives in their territory of occupied Germany. The SMAD was the instrument through which the Soviets administered and controlled every facet of political, social, and economic life in the SBZ.¹²² In these initial postwar years, the SMAD formalized and instituted a number of economic reforms that were nothing short of revolutionary. The Soviets and the German Communists believed that they were acting on behalf of the working-class by subordinating economic policy to the political objective of destroying the foundations of “bourgeois power.”¹²³ For this reason, the SMAD permitted and supported the re-establishment of the “working class” co-operatives rather than “bourgeois private trade.”

By controlling trade in the postwar years, the Soviets and the German communists were able to use consumption, and, by association, the *Konsum* as a form of social control. Since these authorities controlled services and supplies, they were in an advantageous position to exercise leverage over what was then an exceedingly destitute and desperate population. Scarcity, in other words, was a key to the SMAD’s strength and a formidable means to subjugate the population. In later years, scarcity, although remaining a key to social control as people conformed in order to get access to “luxury” items, hindered the SED’s attempts to inspire

¹²² Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 29.

¹²³ Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 22.

popular support.¹²⁴ But rather than legitimize its rule through consumption, the SED preferred and attempted to base its rule on antifascism.

2.1.2. Antifascism

Foucault argues that every society has its “major narratives” based on a multitude of religious, political, and scientific discourses; in the case of the DDR, the fundamental state narrative was antifascism.¹²⁵ At its most basic, antifascism means opposition to fascism. The term antifascism originated in Italy in the early 1920s as a response to Mussolini’s dictatorship, and shortly thereafter it became common currency and discourse within the Communist International.¹²⁶ From its very beginnings, the DDR claimed to be an antifascist state, comprised of resisters, victims, and survivors of the Nazi régime who were opposed to neo-Nazism, racism, and xenophobia. The DDR state-narrative was predicated on the notion that the communists were the most important group of victims of the Nazis, while simultaneously being the most important force of resistance. The SED legitimized its claims to power on the basis of this state-sponsored narrative, thereby making it a critical component of its discourse on class struggle. Accordingly, proof of antifascist activity was an important biographical credential for reaching the upper echelons of power in the SED-state. Of course, antifascism was not only a state narrative, but it was also a rallying cry for a struggle against the numerous enemies of socialism. This element of DDR propaganda was particularly prominent in the late 1940s and into the 1970s. During this period, West Germany was described as “fascist” and the 17 June Uprising in 1953 was caused by “fascist provocation.” The Wall was explained as a necessary measure to protect the DDR state from fascists and officially hailed as the “antifascist-protection-wall.” By

¹²⁴ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*: 246.

¹²⁵ Foucault, “Discourse on Language,” 152.

¹²⁶ The Communist International, or Comintern, was an international organization founded in Moscow in March 1919. Its primary purpose was to spread communist revolutions throughout the world with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the international bourgeois state which was to be replaced by Soviet republics.

the 1970s, as relations between the two German states improved, the rhetoric of antifascism became less pronounced. In later decades, the pantheon of antifascist resisters was expanded to include social democrats, Christians, officers who attempted to assassinate Hitler on 20 July 1944, and victims of the Holocaust; this was clearly a manoeuvre to spread the legitimacy-base of the DDR to wider segments of the population.¹²⁷ The *Konsum*, as a political mass-organization, was expected to propagate and legitimize the SED system of rule by virtue of the antifascist myth along with its symbols and systems of belief to its students, employees, and members. Of course, antifascism was not just a state narrative but also a storyline accepted by large parts of the German population.

2.1.3. The SED and the founding of the bloc parties

In June 1945, one month after the end of the War, Marshal Zhukov issued Order Number Two, which allowed for the establishment of antifascist political parties in the SBZ. Thereafter, political life in the SBZ quickly began to re-emerge. Not surprisingly, the first party to appear on the political scene was the Communist Party of Germany (**KPD**) on 11 June 1945. In its manifesto, the KPD advocated an antifascist democratic republic, rather than a Soviet style political system. Initially, the KPD, in an effort to win popular support, toned down its Soviet rhetoric and presented itself as a broadly based workers' party; this, however, did not last, and already by 1946, the party began to transform itself into a Soviet style party. Four days after the KPD, the Social Democratic Party (**SPD**) was founded, promoting both democracy and socialism under the leadership of Otto Grotewohl. Another party established at this time was the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (**CDU**) on 26 June. On 5 July 1945, the founding of the CDU was closely followed by the establishment of the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany

¹²⁷ Annette Leo, "Antifaschismus," in *Erinnerungsort der DDR* ed. Martin Sabrow (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2009), 36-40.

(LDPD).¹²⁸ The CDU and the LDPD advocated private property and a market economy. In many ways, these parties were the antithesis of communism.¹²⁹ There will be recurrent references to these parties in later sections.

In July 1945, the four parties (KPD, SPD, CDU, and LDPD) agreed to form a bloc of antifascist democratic parties under Soviet control. The goals of the bloc were to further de-Nazify Germany, establish a functional economy as quickly as possible, create a democratic *Rechtsstaat* (state founded on the rule of law), and, most importantly, implement measures decreed by the occupying power.¹³⁰ The Bloc System was an instrument of control for SMAD and the KPD, which enabled these organizations to transform the political and social systems in the zone along Soviet guidelines.¹³¹ However, the subsequent election in Austria and the SBZ proved that the non-Socialist parties and the SPD were becoming troublesome rivals to the KPD.

On 4 November 1945, the election in Austria was a massive defeat for the Communists. The Social Democrats won 76 out of 165 seats in the Austrian national assembly versus four seats for the Communists. This election in Austria implied to the Communists in the SBZ that they could not win an open and free election against the SPD; thus, a fusion between the two parties was forced and a new party was formed: the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, **SED**).¹³² On 21 April 1946, in the Admiralpalast Theatre in Berlin, former KPD leader Wilhelm Pieck and former SPD leader Otto Grotewohl crossed the stage, met in the middle, and shook hands to seal the fusion of the two parties. This famous handshake,

¹²⁸ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 24-25.

¹²⁹ Martin McCauley, *The German Democratic Republic since 1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 781-84.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 782.

¹³¹ Dennis, *Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic*: 14.

¹³² Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 36.

shown in the image below, remained the symbol of the SED for roughly the next forty-three years.¹³³



Illustration 2: The famous handshake between Wilhelm Pieck (left) and Otto Grotewohl (right) under the portrait of Engels and Bebel at the Unity Party Congress, where the KPD and SPD were joined as the SED, 21-22 April 1946¹³⁴



Illustration 3: The *Konsum* did its part to promote this symbolic Handshake at a department store in Erfurt in 1953 (on the left is Lenin, on the right is unidentified)¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid., 39.

¹³⁴ Heinz Voßke, *Wilhelm Pieck 1876-1960: Bilder und Dokumente aus seinem Leben* (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben 1975), 174.

¹³⁵ Kaminsky, *Illustrierte Konsum-geschichte der DDR*: 8.

After 1948, the SED was transformed into a “Party of a New Type.” This meant that the SED was evolving into a Marxist Party committed to a highly centralized organization based upon Leninist and Stalinist ideology. In other words, the SED was to be refashioned after the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).¹³⁶ This reorganization involved increased party discipline and the elimination of any opinions that did not adhere to the new official party line.¹³⁷ Thereafter, social democracy was vilified and the former co-operation between social democrats and communists, on which the SED was founded, was abandoned.¹³⁸ With the support of SMAD, the communists within the SED were able to “democratically centralize” power under their control and eventually consolidate their influence throughout the emerging bureaucracy, including the security and judicial systems.¹³⁹ In this respect, the *Konsum* mirrored the SED’s wider political shifts in policy and increasingly hard-line stance against its perceived political threats. For instance, social democratic influence within the *Konsum* was also targeted, and the SED’s control of the *Konsum* was further strengthened at that time.

Similar to Lenin’s CPSU, the SED was governed through a system of democratic centralism. This meant that lower levels in the party hierarchy were bound to implement the resolutions taken from above. More specifically, power was highly centralized in the hands of the Politburo and the party leader (General Secretary or First Secretary). Below the Politburo was the Central Committee, which functioned more as an advisory committee than a decision making body; it was elected during the party congresses held approximately every five years. While membership in these organizations was partially based on expertise in specific sectors

¹³⁶ Monika Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (1995): 690.

¹³⁷ Josie McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004), 50.

¹³⁸ Grieder, "In Defence of Totalitarianism," 22.

¹³⁹ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 39.

such as the economy and military, one's commitment to the party was almost always the decisive factor in such appointments.¹⁴⁰ In the next chapter, it will be evident that the *Konsum* eventually began to reflect this highly centralized style of governance, as power became concentrated in the VDK (something similar to the Politburo in this context) and the *Konsum* president.

2.1.4. The planned economy

Distribution in East Germany was not only economic, but it was also political because the SED directed and controlled all aspects of economic life. *Konsum* and SED functionaries were, therefore, responsible for the most trivial aspects of consumption, ranging from distribution practices to the design of the state-produced chocolate Christmas Santa Claus. This was the primary problem of the centrally planned economy, as production and distribution decisions were by a small group of elites within the *Konsum* and the party. According to communist economic theory, the relationship between consumption and production had to be determined by the economic plan, rather than the market. In communist societies, consumption was to enable existence and satisfy basic need. However, the SED leadership quickly realized that this ideology was not compatible with the reality of having a successful market-driven West German state as a neighbour. Ultimately, consumption and distribution in East Germany became the gauge for the legitimacy of the socialist system.¹⁴¹

When the SMAD introduced the Soviet model of the planned economy to the SBZ/DDR, the Soviets and German Communists prioritized economic investment in heavy industry, while ignoring demand for consumer products.¹⁴² In the words of historian Peter Caldwell, “the plan had three purposes: it was a technical means of organizing an entire industrial economy, a

¹⁴⁰ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 147.

¹⁴¹ Juliane Schütterle, *Klassenkampf im Kaufhaus: Versorgung und Sonderversorgung in der DDR 1971-1989* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Thüringen, 2009), 5.

¹⁴² Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*: 2.

political ideal of the total governance of society, and a road map toward a qualitatively different world.”¹⁴³ Caldwell continues, “the plan was intended to move the object, society, from its present state to a future one. The subject of the plan was the party as the avant-garde of society; the object of the plan was the totality of social and economic relations; the goal of the plan was a transition from capitalism and fascism to socialism and democracy (as defined by the party).”¹⁴⁴

Yet, historian Niall Ferguson concludes:

The problem for the Soviet Union was simple: the United States offered a far more attractive version of civilian life than the Soviets could. And this was not just because of an inherent advantage in terms of resource endowment. It was because centralized economic planning, though indispensable to success in the development of nuclear arms, was wholly unsuited to the satisfaction of consumer wants. The planner is best able to devise and deliver the ultimate weapon to a single client, the state. But the planner can never hope to meet the desires of millions of individual consumers, whose tastes are in any case in a state of constant flux.¹⁴⁵

As will be discussed in later chapters, the SED invested ever more resources in meeting the consumption demands of its citizens. However, the SED’s style of command economy was ill suited to meet the constantly changing demands of so many people. Hence, the command economy was never able to deliver the promises of opulence signified in *Konsum* propaganda, which had a strong eroding effect on the DDR’s popular support.

2.1.5. The National Front and the mass-organizations

The East German Parliament (*Volkskammer* or People's Chamber) was the single legislative chamber of the DDR. Its members (from its founding in 1949 until the first free elections on 18 March 1990) were elected on a slate called the National Front. While this system had the semblance of democracy, all the opposition parties answered to and were controlled by the SED. From 1981 to 1987, the SED was allocated 127 seats, whereas the Christian

¹⁴³ Peter C. Caldwell, *Dictatorship, State Planning, and Social Theory in the German Democratic Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 237.

Democratic Union, the Liberal Democratic Party, the National Democratic Party, and the Democratic Farmers' Party were allocated 52 seats each for a combined total of 208 seats. In addition, seats were allocated to various mass-organizations. Among them were the Free German Trade Union with 68 seats, the Free German Youth with 40 seats, the Democratic Women's League with 35 seats, and the Cultural Association with 22 seats. The co-operatives were not allocated seats in the East German parliament, but two *Konsum* presidents were members (the role of *Konsum* presidents will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter).

On 10 June 1945, the SMAD issued its Second Decree or Order Number Two, permitting the establishment of mass-organizations in the SBZ.¹⁴⁶ According to Lenin, mass-organizations were intended to act as "transmission-belts" through which the SED could survey, indoctrinate, influence, organize, infiltrate, and control the population. Officially, the *Konsum* was the second largest such organization in East Germany, with 4.1 million members in 1971 and 4.6 million in 1987. The Confederation of Free German Trade Union (FDGB) had a membership of 7.2 million in 1971, which increased to 9.5 million in 1987. The Women's Democratic League (DFD) had a membership of 1.5 million in 1987.¹⁴⁷

These mass-organizations had to convey SED ideas, policies, and intentions to target sectors of society; for the *Konsum*, this included workers, youth, farmers, women, and families. To quote historian Corry Ross, "the mass-organization at the local level functioned like

¹⁴⁶ David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-occupied Germany, 1945-1949* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁴⁷ Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR., Panorama DDR (Film), and Intertext Fremdsprachendienst der DDR., *Information GDR: The Comprehensive and Authoritative Reference Source of the German Democratic Republic*, 1st ed. (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 267.

intermediary pulleys connecting the central party authorities (the engine) and the masses (the wheels).”¹⁴⁸ Historian Mary Fulbrook further explains this targeting:

Beyond the age of about six, the coverage of the East German population by one or another mass-organization was more or less total. One would have to be an exceedingly rare individual never to have belonged to a single one of these organizations (arguably only an unusually religiously committed, unemployed person of extraordinary willpower, lack of leisure interests or ambitions, and remarkable capacity for survival as a loner in this most collectivized society). The importance of the system of mass-organizations in the shaping and experience of East Germans’ lives cannot be overestimated.¹⁴⁹

Although mass-organizations were supposed to ideologically influence the population, they were not able to completely dominate the lives of their members. Instead, the population used mass-organizations as a means to provide non-political entertainment, such as holidays, pursuing hobbies, and other interests.¹⁵⁰ Accordingly, the SED devoted a great deal of its meagre resources for the purposes of strengthening the mass-organizations, the purpose of which was to drench and saturate social life and leisure time with party ideology.¹⁵¹ As shown in Chapter 4, the *Konsum* invested a significant amount of resources into such activities in which participants, as interviews indicate, enjoyed their participation.

2.1.6. The Stasi

One of the Soviets’ top priorities following the defeat of Hitler was to ensure that local police forces were in place, which the SED and the SMAD sought to control from the onset of the Soviet occupation. By 1948, the Soviets and the SED had, indeed, managed to form an impressive police system in their zone, with nearly 81,000 men and women working in the security apparatus. The SED leadership clearly understood the importance of having these forces

¹⁴⁸ Corey Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots: the Transformation of East Germany, 1945-65* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 204-05.

¹⁴⁹ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 86.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 86-88.

¹⁵¹ Fulbrook, "The Limits of Totalitarianism: God, State and Society in the GDR," 39.

under their strict control. During the First Party Congress in 1949, the future leader of the Stasi, Erich Mielke, “let his comrades know, in no uncertain terms, that these forces were critical to the party’s calculus of building its influence in East German society.”¹⁵² While the crime rate drastically diminished in the late 1940s, the security agencies continued to expand in the ensuing years to target those accused of “political offences.”¹⁵³

On 8 February 1950, the SED leadership founded the East German Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, **MfS** or **Stasi**). Its creation was presented to East Germans as a necessary and defensive measure to manage the worsening Cold War with the West.¹⁵⁴ The German leaders of the newly created security ministry – Wilhelm Zaisser, Ernst Wollweber, and Erich Mielke¹⁵⁵ – had previously been agents of Soviet intelligence, with which they maintained close contact.¹⁵⁶ The MfS initially focused its efforts on groups and individuals who opposed the East German régime, particularly members of the “rebellious” youth, as well as external enemies such as the American “imperialists.”¹⁵⁷

The Stasi employed informants as a means of resolving conflicts and controlling the workforce in the factories. It also employed official representatives who openly observed and monitored state-owned factories. Stasi officers and informants produced regular reports on the functioning of the *Konsum* factory and the *Konsum* retail outlet. Generally, the presence of Stasi officers was part of the daily routine of the workplace, and they were treated as colleagues; however, they used their status to recruit informants from among the people already working in

¹⁵² Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*: 16.

¹⁵³ Richard Bessel, “The people’s police and the people in Ulbricht’s Germany,” in *The Workers’ and Peasants’ State* ed. Patrick Major and Jonathan Osmond (Communism and society in East Germany under Ulbricht: Manchester University Press 2002), 63.

¹⁵⁴ Childs and Popplewell, *The Stasi*: 45-46.

¹⁵⁵ Erich Mielke came into prominence within the KPD during the interwar period serving as an armed revolutionary. After the Second World War he was actively involved in the East German intelligence services and was the head of the Stasi from 1956 to 1989.

¹⁵⁶ Childs and Popplewell, *The Stasi*: 33.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 13.

the factory.¹⁵⁸ Stasi involvement in the *Konsum* is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 and Chapter 9.

While Stasi officers were usually open about their profession and status within this organization, unofficial members or informants (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, **IMs**) worked secretly and only the Stasi recruiters knew their identities. The informants had a few primary roles in the *Konsum*: spying on colleagues, reporting on the morale of the workforce, and monitoring the general mood of the public in relation to consumption. From the information gathered by these informants, the Stasi made weekly reports written from their vantage points within *Konsum* stores. Their reports were often tainted with their personal views and preferences, which unsurprisingly led to highly subjective reports that put others in great danger of being seen as politically unreliable.¹⁵⁹

The Stasi was a formidable surveillance apparatus. It continued to expand, reaching 90,000 full-time employees and nearly 200,000 informants by the 1980s. These employees and informants had the singular goal of detecting resistance by being informed about all aspects of people's lives. The most appalling aspect of this type of security system was the endemic distrust that its omnipresence engendered and spread throughout DDR society. Many began to resent the lack of trust between doctors and patients, lawyers and clients, and even wives and husbands.¹⁶⁰ People also detested Stasi tactics, such as sending compromising photographs and letters with false allegations to friends and neighbours. Worse still, Stasi agents spread rumours that the alleged "class enemy" had actually worked for the MfS and had a "loose tongue,"

¹⁵⁸ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Working in East Germany: Normality in a Socialist Dictatorship, 1961-79* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 161.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Robert Gellately, "Denunciations in Twentieth-Century Germany: Aspects of Self-Policing in the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic," *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996): 954.

making the person appear untrustworthy.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, Fulbrook suggests, “many developed coping strategies of one sort or another, such that – almost like swatting unwanted insects at a summer picnic – the *Stasi* became for them a predictable and manageable evil in an otherwise tolerable or enjoyable life.”¹⁶² Whether the *Stasi* was perceived as a nuisance or something worse, *Stasi* officers and informants certainly made deep inroads into the *Konsum* and monitored its employees and customers for any signs of potential resistance.

The *Stasi* was initially used to guard industrial areas and protect the economy. This basic role as the protector of the economy remained intact until 1989.¹⁶³ Yet, Bruce notes that the central focus of *Stasi* operations varied from district to district (*kreisspezifisch*). Specifically, he gives the example of district Gransee where protection of military installations was the primary concern for the *Stasi*. On the other hand, in district Perleberg the *Stasi*’s central focus was the protection of the economy.¹⁶⁴ And so, to give a relatively slippery answer, at certain periods and in certain locations the *Stasi* held a dominant position in the economy. As will be seen at later points of this dissertation, the *Stasi* was willing to spend time and resources to micromanage the economy in order to infiltrate into the most humdrum and anodyne aspects of the economy in attempt to have it work better for its citizens. It will also become clear that the *Stasi* was reporting on and reacting to individual demands for improved consumption (see section 8.4.1). In this sense, the *Stasi* was acting as a liaison between state and consumers. In order to increase the population’s commitment to the East German state, the *Stasi*, acting on behalf of consumers,

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 960.

¹⁶² Fulbrook, “‘Normalization’ in the GDR in Retrospect,” 312.

¹⁶³ Georg Wagner-Kyora, “Spione der Arbeit -- Zur Methodik der Alltagsgeschichte mit IM-Berichten aus Industriebetrieben,” in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 217.

¹⁶⁴ Gary Bruce, “>>Wir haben den Kontakt zu den Massen nie verloren<<: Das Verhältnis zwischen *Stasi* und Gesellschaft am Beispiel der Kreise Perleberg und Gransee,” in *Staatssicherheit und Gesellschaft: Studien zum Herrschaftsalltag in der DDR*, ed. Jens Gieseke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 378.

ordered the *Konsum* to produce goods that would please its customers.¹⁶⁵ However, as the guardian of the entire East German economy, the Stasi was overburdened with safeguarding literally all facets of political and economical life:

Such as microelectronics, the ailing energy sector, the chemical industry and foreign trade; the protection of key personnel and groups; the uncovering of enemy plans and activities in enterprises and institutions at home as well as those of enemy secret services in the Operation Area, especially the FRG [West Germany]; ensuring a stable balance of payments; comprehensive surveillance of would be émigrés and East German citizens who had contacts with Westerners; monitoring the general political operational and economic situation; and the prevention of unrest, strikes, fires, and damage to plant and equipment.¹⁶⁶

The Stasi – the shield and sword of the East German economy – could never adequately complete all of these duties and was only able to intervene and put out the fire when a given situation became particularly dire.

2.1.7. Stalinism and land reform

Stalinism can be defined as forced social transformations, namely collectivization, industrialization, expropriation of private property, and the establishment of a centrally planned economy. With these policies, to quote historian Norman Naimark, “a new kind of civilization was created in [eastern Germany] – a unique meshing of Soviet culture and German leftist traditions inherited from a half century of struggle against imperial, Weimar, and Nazi domination. But it was a civilization frayed at the edges and full of contradictions.”¹⁶⁷ In fact, in the DDR, the process of Stalinization was so brutal that its impact endures to the present day. In this regard, the SBZ/DDR clearly underwent, as Naimark shows, a brutal, repressive, and revolutionary Stalinization process that created a new society:

¹⁶⁵ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 551, Direktive über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen leitenden Organe der Konsumgenossenschaften, 3-5.

¹⁶⁶ Mike Dennis and Peter Brown, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2003), 120.

¹⁶⁷ Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*: 464.

The German Democratic Republic – as a state, as a “nation,” and as a society – was created primarily out of the interaction of Russians and Germans in the Soviet zone. Its success, its failures, and its ultimate collapse derived from the initial institutions and habits of interaction established during the immediate postwar period. The effects of the Soviet occupation still reverberate throughout eastern Germany. Far from being an isolated episode in the flow of German history that can be dispensed with and forgotten now that unification has been accomplished, the history of the Soviet occupation is a key component in understanding the present and future of German society.¹⁶⁸

Similarly, Stalinism and its ideological projects such as land reform and the later collectivization of agriculture shaped co-operatives in the DDR.

The first revolutionary and Stalinist driven policy to impact the SBZ came in the autumn of 1945 in the form of land redistribution. The Soviets and German Communists agreed that the countryside had to be reformed in order to gain support for the new régime and to punish what the Soviets perceived as the most ardent supporters of the Third Reich (the *Junker* landlords – the dominant power in East Germany for centuries). The policy of land reform or land redistribution was the first major Soviet and communist intervention into the social structures of eastern Germany. The confiscated land was distributed in plots of five to ten acres to “new farmers,” namely land-poor peasants, landless farm labourers, and refugees from the eastern territories.¹⁶⁹ This enormous undertaking redistributed 2,743,306 hectares of land formerly belonging to 7,000 *Junker*.¹⁷⁰ Land reform was, therefore, nothing short of revolutionary. Throughout the SBZ and particularly in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg, it led to the fundamental restructuring of land ownership and social relations, with some 82,810 families having received part of the confiscated agricultural land.¹⁷¹

Nevertheless, large farmers still held considerable power and control over machinery and food supply. For this reason, in 1948, the SED bombarded them with a number of new restraints

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 470-71.

¹⁶⁹ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 17-18.

¹⁷⁰ Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945-53: From antifascism to Stalinism*: 154.

¹⁷¹ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 19.

including higher taxes. Also, a new political party, the SED controlled Democratic Peasants Party of Germany (*Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands*, **DBD**), advocated the platform of land reform, the collectivization of agriculture, and the strengthening of bonds between the farmer and the worker. Given this repression, around 5,000 large farmers simply abandoned their farms and fled to the West while the inner-German border was still relatively open between 1950 and 1952. To deal with this crisis in the countryside, the party introduced its first wave of collectivization in July 1952 under the banner of the “building of socialism.”¹⁷²

On a practical level, the *Konsum* supported the SED in these revolutionary transformations by using consumption as leverage over the population. To explain, the *Konsum* provided farmers who were supporting these policies with better provisions, while denying supplies to others considered reluctant to acquiesce. Furthermore, the *Konsum* had to politically propagandize and garner the support of rural inhabitants during these drastic changes in the social structure of rural Germany.¹⁷³

2.1.8. The 1950s: the June 1953 Uprising and the New Course

During the 1950s, the East German régime called upon its citizens to make sacrifices in the form of acquiescing to material deprivations and providing communal labour for the “building of socialism.” In contrast to this harsh reality, the SED’s and the *Konsum*’s Propaganda departments popularized images of prosperity under socialism (see images in Chapter 7). However, as historian Katherine Pence suggests, “basing the régime’s early years on a promise of things to come gave the DDR a more tenuous hold on legitimacy that would be difficult to maintain.”¹⁷⁴ Already in the 1950s, consumption became stratified between two

¹⁷² Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 221.

¹⁷³ Hans-Joachim Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, vol. Band 12 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1982), 27.

¹⁷⁴ Pence, “The Myth of a Suspended Present,” 142.

classes of shoppers. Lower priced, subsidized, and rationed goods were often sold in the *Konsum*, whereas the HO stores sold more luxurious and more expensive goods.¹⁷⁵ The discrepancies between the two stores and two forms of distribution engendered a highly stratified consumer culture in what was ideologically supposed to be an egalitarian, class free, and socialist society, all the while highlighting that the SED's promises of equality and prosperity were not being delivered. As will be seen in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, the *Konsum* was charged with combating this negative perception of the state by demonstrating that prosperity had indeed arrived.

At the Second Party Congress in the summer of 1952, the SED declared, "The political and economic conditions, as well as the consciousness of the working-class and the majority of workers, have sufficiently developed, so that the building of socialism has become the main task of the German Democratic Republic."¹⁷⁶ The "building of socialism" affected all sections of DDR society and led to further revolutionary changes through the following: collectivization of farms and the formation of agricultural co-operatives (*Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften*, **LPGs – 1952 to 1990**), a campaign against churches and their followers, increased restrictions on independent economic activity, the near abolition of the private sector in industrial production, the systematic elimination of private retail, and mass-investment in large construction projects at the expense of consumer goods production. To remove a potential threat to the SED's planned construction of socialism, the party eliminated provincial governments by replacing them with fourteen regional districts called *Bezirke*.¹⁷⁷ That year (1952), co-ops received a new mandate from the SED, which demanded the support of the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷⁶ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 159.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 160.

Konsum propaganda departments during the establishment of these societal transformations.¹⁷⁸

This propaganda was directed at farmers in the countryside. In fact, in the countryside the SED ordered the *Konsum* to become the primary means of promulgating party propaganda by using its retail network. This propaganda initiative was intended to encourage and pressure farmers to join the LPGs.¹⁷⁹

During the first big collectivization push of 1952-53, few East German farmers became convinced of the virtues of collective farming, so many resisted joining the LPGs and fled to West Germany. Some of the farmers who remained employed tactics of deliberate dithering in an effort to avoid collectivization, causing the SED to postpone its forced reorganization of the countryside until later in the decade.¹⁸⁰ The growing crisis in agricultural production contributed to the June Uprising of 1953. Shortages and general frustration with the command economy nearly led to East Germans toppling the régime in June 1953. Indeed, the market based economy and consumer society emerging in West Germany were a real and constant threat to the DDR régime, which was unable to respond to the demands of consumers, even though it devoted an ever increasing amount of resources in its attempt to do so.¹⁸¹ Following the June Uprising, concessions were made to consumers in the form of the so-called New Course as a tool to stabilize the régime.¹⁸²

The New Course was a move away from the Stalinist focus on heavy industry. Furthermore, the New Course was a measure to direct more of the state's meagre resources to consumer goods and the lowering of prices. At the Fourth Party Congress in 1954, Walter Ulbricht outlined the basic fundamentals of this shift:

¹⁷⁸ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 19.

¹⁷⁹ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 27.

¹⁸⁰ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 70.

¹⁸¹ Ferguson, *Civilization*: 249.

¹⁸² Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 320.

The essence of the New Course exists in the slowing at this time of the tempo of development of certain parts of heavy industry and heavy machine construction, which was forced upon us by the division of Germany. Through this, more means will be freed for production of goods for mass consumption. Extraordinary measures will be met to promote more strongly the food and stimulants industry, the textile industry and other branches of light industry, housing and construction and above all agriculture, and to support the initiative or private crafts and entrepreneurs. More funds will be made available for this.¹⁸³

The *Konsum* played a critical role in the New Course. It showcased socialism through the delivery of modern commodities, such as televisions and fashionable clothing, and it demonstrated and promoted the achievements of the New Course in shop windows as is evident in Illustration 4. In Chapter 7, there will be a greater discussion of the *Konsum* as a showcase of socialism and the impact of the shop window displays.



Illustration 4: A shop window promoting the first five-year-plan (1950-1955)
The unstoppable progress of the five-year-plans was a common theme in *Konsum* shop window displays during the New Course.¹⁸⁴

The New Course effectively came to an end in July 1958 at the Fifth Party Congress, which heralded a renewed impetus on the building of socialism. As a result, the state again pressured private enterprises and private farms to become at least partially state-owned enterprises. There was also a renewed campaign to urge farmers to join agricultural co-

¹⁸³ Walter Ulbricht, "Aus dem Rechenschaftsbericht des Zentralkomitees, 1954," in *From Rations to Fashions*, ed. Katherine Pence (Berlin 30. March to 6. April), 508.

¹⁸⁴ AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu Gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und Politischen Themen, 1952 Schaufenstergestaltung politische Agitation und Ware, Image 408, 408.

operatives. While these new measures led to reductions in the provision of food (as farmers fled to the West in increasing numbers), the Fifth Party Congress promoted the development of a new socialist consumer culture in which the DDR would not only catch up with but also surpass West German per capita consumption (*einholen und überholen*). This policy was initiated in a new Seven-Year-Plan to be fulfilled by the mid-1960s.¹⁸⁵

2.1.9. The 1960s: closing the border and the continued collectivization of agriculture

In spite of the opposition to collectivization during the previous decade, a new drive of collectivization began in earnest in the early 1960s.¹⁸⁶ These unpopular policies and problems often associated with consumption resulted in reportedly 2.6 million East Germans fleeing to the West between 1949 and 1961.¹⁸⁷ To stop the exodus, East German security forces rolled barbed wire across the open border between East and West Berlin on 13 August 1961. They explained to the citizens that this border was to protect them from fascism and imperialism. Although brutal, the erection of the Wall represented the economic survival of the régime by impounding its best workers and farmers.¹⁸⁸

The SED used collectivization to further integrate agricultural production into the planned economy, while simultaneously extending the party's authority throughout diverse rural communities. In April 1960, the SED had – at least on paper – officially completed its campaign of collectivization. In the countryside, however, the rural communities of the DDR discordantly rejected the agricultural collectives. Many farmers refused to work on the collective farms and simply abandoned them by leaving the DDR. But, with the construction of the Wall in August 1961, flight to the West was no longer an option. Thus, the rural population had no choice but to

¹⁸⁵ Katherine Pence, "From Rations to Fashions: The Gendered Politics of East and West German Consumption, 1945-1961 - Volume I" (University of Michigan 1999), 529.

¹⁸⁶ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 221.

¹⁸⁷ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 551.

¹⁸⁸ Maier, *Dissolution*: 24.

accept the end of private farming along with new systems of rural organization.¹⁸⁹ Fulbrook states:

It took some years before the new organization of farming became in any way routinized, with the breaking of traditional, fiercely independent attitudes among small farmers and the emergence of new forms of co-operation and conflict resolution in agricultural collectives. Yet agriculture, in a modest sort of way, was arguably one of the few success stories of the DDR, at least from mid-1960 to the mid-1970s.¹⁹⁰

The *Konsum* was critically involved in the transformation of consumption practices in rural towns. They caused lasting changes in the agricultural areas of the DDR and aided the Party during the processes of forced collectivization.¹⁹¹ From the vantage point of the SED, it was possible to use consumption as means through which to implement political work, to use consumption as leverage over farmers in the countryside, and to use consumption to spread the party's influence into rural areas via the network of *Konsum* retail outlets.¹⁹² However, constant scarcity of desired goods coupled with an overabundance of unwanted goods in the *Konsum* created a perpetual source of discontentment and social resentment in the DDR. As a result, many rural residents regularly complained about and were continually disappointed by the fluctuating availability, uneven distribution, limited choice, and poor quality of not only luxury goods, but also essential items such as coal, fuel, and daily foodstuffs.¹⁹³

During the 1960s, the régime increased its commitment to consumption by promising the elimination of rationing and making broad improvements to the culture of shopping through the

¹⁸⁹ George Last, "Rural Functionaries and the Transmission of Agricultural Policy: The Case of *Bezirk* Erfurt from the 1960s to the 1970s," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalization of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 76-77.

¹⁹⁰ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 222.

¹⁹¹ Ludwig, "Vom Dorfkonsum zum >>Komplexen System der Landversorgung<<," 51.

¹⁹² SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 10.

¹⁹³ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 245.

implementation of the New Economic System (*Neues Ökonomisches System*, NES) in 1963.¹⁹⁴ That year, the SED, under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, changed the fundamentals of the DDR's political economy through the adoption and implementation of the NES. The various economic industries were given greater flexibility and responsibility in order to increase the state's economic productivity. For the consumer co-operatives, the NES led to an increase in the productivity of their industries and enlargement in the assortment of consumer goods.¹⁹⁵ To meet the demands of the NES, the consumer co-operatives, at the suggestion of the Ministry for Trade and Provision, attempted to make various improvements, including the modernization of their stores, services, and consumer goods.¹⁹⁶

In the late 1960s, domestic and international events had an impact on the *Konsum*. It is almost certain that co-ops and their members and employees would have noticed shifts in the political and economic landscape. For instance, the early to mid-1960s was – in consequence of the construction of the Berlin Wall – actually a period of reduced internal and external tensions. Nevertheless, it is clear that these events reverberated throughout the entire *Konsum* organization. From that point on, the *Konsum* had to explain to its members and workers why there was suddenly an “Antifascist Wall” dividing the city of Berlin. In fact, the *Konsum* was often charged with explaining the current political situation to members, as was the case with the Prague Spring in 1968 and the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia by Eastern Bloc forces (this event brought an end of relative de-Stalinization, with some economic experimentation, or reformist style socialism in the Eastern Bloc). What is important to note here is that the *Konsum*,

¹⁹⁴ Katherine Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand': Consumption, Gender and the Relationship between State and Citizenry in the GDR's Crisis of 17 June 1953," *German History* 19, no. 2 (2001): 221-22.

¹⁹⁵ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 26.

¹⁹⁶ Brett Fairbairn, "Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik 1945 bis 1990," *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* (1998): 179.

to some degree, participated in and was influenced by these wider historical developments. All of this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

2.1.10. The 1970s and the establishment of new forms of luxury retail

The 1970s saw growing debt and monetary pressures, the rise of the *Intershops*, which sold high-quality goods for Western currency, and unfavourable comparisons with Western consumerism. These problems resulted from, as historian Charles Maier pinpoints, the Eighth Party Congress in 1971. During this key moment in the history of the DDR, the party promised a greater abundance and assortment of consumer goods and a generous state-supported welfare-system in return for support and acceptance of SED rule. This new guiding state principle was christened “the unity of social and economic policy.” In practice, this policy meant that scarce funds previously allocated for investment in industry and innovation now had to subsidize consumer prices, vacations, and social services to prevent the gap between West and East Germany from completely undermining the legitimacy of the SED régime.¹⁹⁷ Hence, it fell upon the *Konsum* to demonstrate the success of the so-called “unity of social and economic policy.”

Erich Honecker, the General Secretary of the SED from 1971 to 1989, believed that once the basic needs of DDR citizens were met (a warm, dry apartment, cheap basic food, and steady work), socialism would flourish. While this paternalism originally helped stabilize the socialist state, it later created inflexible structures that hindered the state’s ability to meet popular consumer needs in the 1970s. That is, this system had little room for innovation; scarcity and shortages were constant features of daily life. As consumers, East Germans experienced constant frustrations, as they were forced to endure long lines, a continual search for goods, and incessant postponement in the purchase of highly desired goods such as cars, washing machines and so on. In the DDR, consumption needs were always secondary and only received attention

¹⁹⁷ Maier, *Dissolution*: 60.

when it became necessary to deal with supply shortages, or in crisis situations that were no longer ‘manageable.’ With consumerism, West Germany was constantly present through the media and TV commercials, which in turn created new consumer needs and increased pressures on the East German state. In short, West German mass consumer culture became the measure of success in the socialist DDR.¹⁹⁸ Rather than gaining popular favour, placating the population, and consolidating the rule of the SED, this shift to consumerism laid bare the shortfalls of the planned economy and the general inadequacies of East German industry.¹⁹⁹ Ironically, Honecker’s promises about socialist consumer abundance raised popular expectations, which could only be partially fulfilled by borrowing massive amounts of “capitalist” money from West Germany to pay for the import of desirable commodities produced in the West.²⁰⁰

The western currency shops (initially confined to port cities and airports) had maintained only a modest public presence during the Ulbricht era in the 1950s and 1960s. Access to foreign currency was the essential element for consumption in the *Intershops*, and thus stratified and separated the population. This separation was not based on privileges provided by the state, but upon both access to West German relatives and their willingness to financially support their relatives in the East. More troublingly, in-demand professionals wanted their pay to be in western currency. In spite of this, Honecker drastically increased the role of hard-currency retail in 1972, as the *Intershops* became a major supplier of luxury goods for East Germans.²⁰¹ In so doing, the SED fundamentally undermined the value of its own currency. In an attempt to further raise its foreign currency reserves while eliminating the black market, the party expanded

¹⁹⁸ Ciesla and Poutrus, "Food Supply in a Planned Economy," 144-45.

¹⁹⁹ Maier, *Dissolution*: 60.

²⁰⁰ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: 323.

²⁰¹ Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 245.

the network of *Intershops*.²⁰² Zatlin concludes, “The SED’s decision to institutionalize the use of West German marks in the *Intershops* did not merely represent a symbolic surrender of the value of capitalist money or a tacit concession to the superiority of the West German consumer model. By the late 1970s, capitalist money had displaced socialist money as a store of value and a medium of exchange.”²⁰³

Women who were likely predominantly *Konsum* shoppers were the largest social group against the *Intershops* because they tended to do the household shopping and were, therefore, most affected by the funnelling of higher quality and western goods into the *Intershops*. These shops were causing such resentment and envy that people began to smash store windows and protest in front of these shops.²⁰⁴ To dispel women’s anger, Honecker permitted an increase in the number of *Exquisit* and *Delikat* stores in 1977.²⁰⁵

The *Exquisit* stores sold leather goods and clothing; they, like the *Intershops*, were created in 1972 but were quickly overshadowed by the *Intershops*. The *Delikat* shops, on the other hand, sold a variety of foodstuffs, ranging from popular West German products like Jacobs coffee and Nutella chocolate spread, to high quality East German products. Although the *Exquisit* and *Delikat* shops did not earn hard currency for the state, they did manage to make a hefty profit. Eventually, East Germans became disgruntled with and began to question the need for upscale East German shops. What is more, these shops undermined the egalitarian politics of the SED, with its foundation in Marxism-Leninism.²⁰⁶ By 1977, the number of *Exquisit* shops reached 109, with a six percent share of East German retail. However, by 1985, this number

²⁰² Ibid., 12.

²⁰³ Ibid., 31.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 262-64.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 268-70.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

ballooned to 442 and the network began to expand into small towns.²⁰⁷ With a peak of 442 *Exquisit*, 300 *Intershops*, and 250 *Delikat* shops, the nearly 30,000 *Konsum* outlets clearly dwarfed the more exclusive shops.²⁰⁸ What is more, these shops, as well as the HO were simply too expensive for most people. We can, therefore, conclude that the *Konsum* was the primary means of retail for the vast majority of East Germans right through from the late 1940s and into the late 1980s.

2.1.11. The 1980s and the collapse of the East German state

By the 1980s, East German society was very different from that of West Germany. Living conditions, social institutions, widespread expectations and experiences had all been dramatically transformed by the then thirty-year experiment in attempting to construct a socialist society as understood by the SED. Far from classless, East German society had its own unique system of inequalities and social stratification. By this decade, the East German state was bordering on bankruptcy literally and figuratively.²⁰⁹

To help anaesthetize the population during this period of stagnation, Honecker permitted the near-universal access to Western television.²¹⁰ Western television meant that there was alternative source of information, including advertising, which was a counterbalance to the SED's attempts at total ideological influence.²¹¹ This access made apparent the attractions of the West: culturally, politically, and especially economically. What is more, it further forced the DDR into a competition of systems, which was an unremitting problem for, as Fulbrook describes it, "this drabber part of a divided nation."²¹²

²⁰⁷ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 143.

²⁰⁸ Dominik Heck, *Konsumpolitik in der DDR* (Munich: GRIN Verlag GmbH, 2011), 18.

²⁰⁹ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 45.

²¹⁰ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*: 5.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 26.

By the 1980s, it can be argued that East German women experienced greater “emancipation” than those in West Germany. In 1984, fifty percent of the East German workforce was female, whereas in West Germany this number was only thirty-nine percent. In both Germanies, women worked in lower paid jobs that garnered lower social status than those occupied by men. This was certainly the case with female employment in the *Konsum*, which is the primary discussion in Chapter 9.²¹³

By late 1989 a substantial number of East Germans had turned their backs on the socialist experiment. On 9 November 1989 the East German press corps announced that the decision had been made to open the border, which was “to take effect at once.” This news release led to masses of people flooding into the West. Historian Niall Ferguson writes that “by midnight all the checkpoints had been forced to open and one of the greatest parties of the century was under way, closely followed by one of its biggest shopping sprees.”²¹⁴ As a result of the collapse of the state, the very survival of the *Konsum* was brought into question, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation.

2.2. Conclusions

The SED attempted nothing less than total penetration and control of social processes, with the demands of total conformity and adulation for every political initiative. Of course, this was an unrealizable project. And by the 1970s and 1980s, it appeared that the state recognized that outright ideological commitment was unattainable and was willing to accept passive and outward conformity. During this period, it seemed as though a sort of East German normality

²¹³ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 200.

²¹⁴ Ferguson, *Civilization*: 251.

had set it, with both ruled and rulers understanding the limits of their respective power. Still, the party was able to build up a repression apparatus that was able to penetrate and observe.²¹⁵

Fairbairn argues that the first two decades of the DDR was a particularly politicized period for the *Konsum*. During this time, the *Konsum* helped the régime propagate modes of thinking that encouraged individuals to support the state.²¹⁶ He continues to argue that, while the *Konsum* may have been more fully under the control of the party during the 1950s and 1960s, it was given a relative amount of autonomy in which to carry out its economic functions during the 1970s and 1980s.²¹⁷ Indeed, this may have been the case, and, as this chapter has shown there were changes in the political fortunes of the SED during the turbulent Cold War. Yet, in my view, archival evidence paints an image of the *Konsum* as a relatively static organization in which the integration of women was always a top priority: this will be a continual theme in the subsequent chapters. What is more, the politicized DDR language remained a constant in the *Konsum*. The most recognizable shift in discourse came only during the latter half of the 1980s when *Eingaben* became collectively written (a significant shift away from atomized venting) and as individual complaint came to be more vocal in the requests, complaints, and demands.

The other primary and constant of the *Konsum* was placating the demands of the population through consumption. And throughout the nearly five years of Soviet rule and the four decades of the DDR, the *Konsum* had to supply its consumers with more and more consumer goods, such as real coffee, to demonstrate the improved standard of living for East

²¹⁵ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*: 62.

²¹⁶ Brett Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War: The Rebuilding and Undermining of the German Consumer Movement, 1945-1955," *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 71, no. 4 (2000): 21. As quoted in Weiß, Vorstandsvorsitzender, Im Auftrag der Delegierten des IV. ordentlichen Verbandstages der Kgen'n des Bezirkes Suhl, an die ICA zu Händen des Präsidenten Herrn Marcel Brod, 15 Mar. 1959, in I.C.A. Archive, C/3.4.1.1.

²¹⁷ Brett Fairbairn, "The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cooperation in Germany," in *Consumers against Capitalism?: Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, ed. Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 298.

Germans. In other words, the *Konsum* and the consumption opportunities and goods it provided for consumers helped to stabilize the régime while subduing unrest.²¹⁸

The SED viewed co-ops as a trustworthy partner and tool to be used during the transition to socialism; however, they were not intended to last beyond this period. Moreover, their socialist legitimacy was based on obedience to the party and state, rather than traditional co-operative values.²¹⁹ While the consumer co-operatives had a century of experience and traditions by 1945 – particularly in the areas of supply, education, and female membership – the *Konsum*, as the following chapter demonstrates, mirrored the hierarchies, suspicions, prejudices, and ambiguities of the East German style of governance.²²⁰ This especially became the case with the establishment of the *Konsum*'s highly centralized top administrative structure: the *Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*, **VDK**.

²¹⁸ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 320.

²¹⁹ Johnston Birchall, *The international co-operative movement* (Manchester, UK Manchester University Press 1997), 15.

²²⁰ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 1.

3. The “democratic centralization” of the *Konsum*

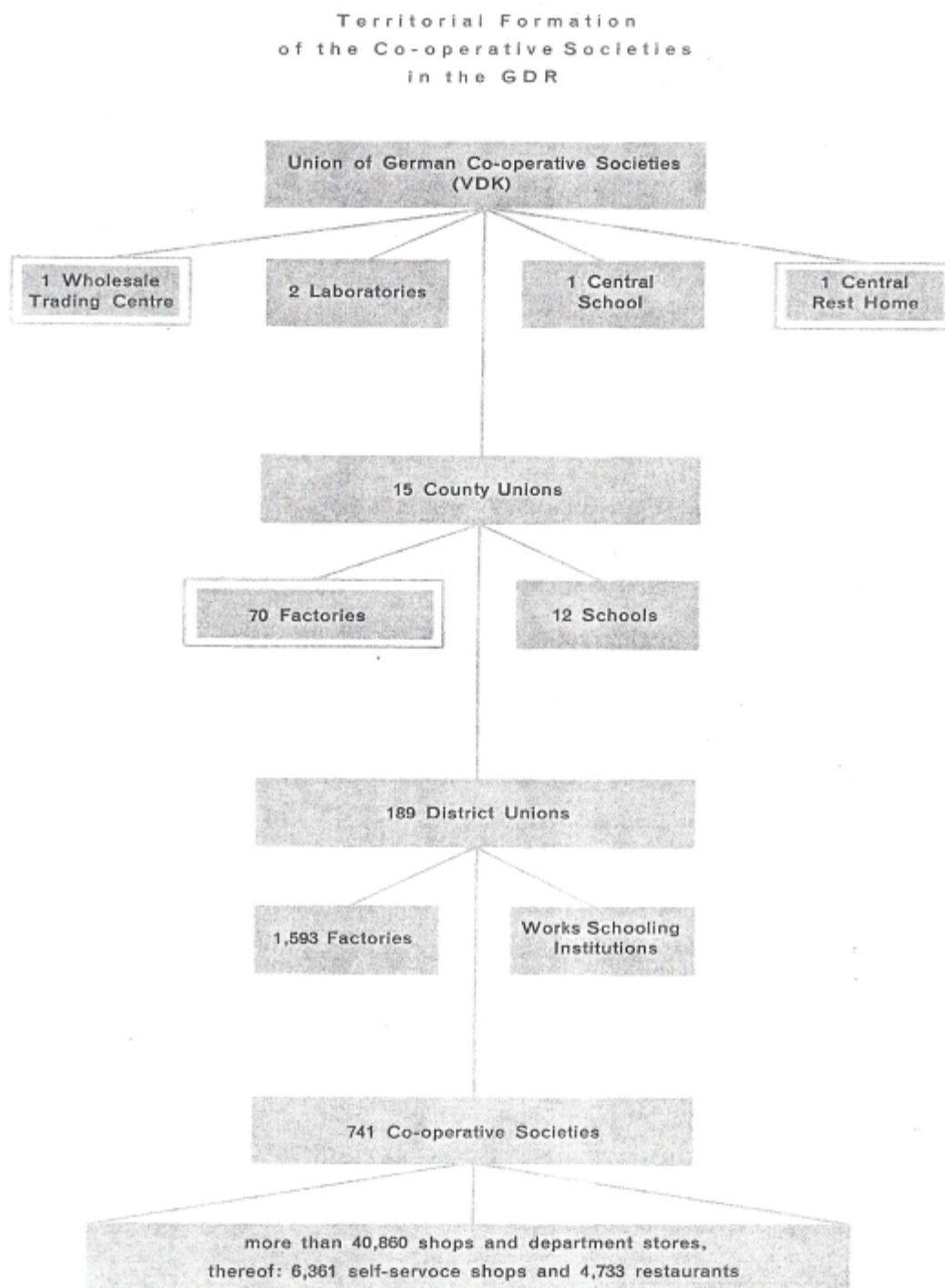


Table 2: The centralized governing structures of the *Konsum* with the VDK at the top (circa 1959)²²¹

²²¹ AKB: 1114/A10, The Co-operatives of the German Democratic Republic, (Berlin: Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 1959), 23.

This chapter, as alluded to in the table on the previous page, discusses the centralization of the operating structures of the *Konsum* and the ways in which the SED hijacked the top administrative branch of the co-ops – the *Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*, **VDK**. This process of centralization is relevant to understanding why the *Konsum* became subordinate to the SED. Therefore, the larger and more complex theme of this chapter is an examination of the hegemony of the SED within the *Konsum*. Due to SED domination, one should be cautious about even associating the word co-operative with the *Konsum* for the simple reason that the term “co-operative” should be associated with voluntary and autonomous governing structures. As will become clear, the compulsory state-decreed creation of “co-operatives” in the DDR created a highly centralized distribution system of rationed goods, with the purpose of eliminating private and non-state controlled retail, especially the black market in the immediate postwar years.²²² What is unique about this chapter is the examination of the democratic centralization of the *Konsum*, along with the beginning of an initial assessment of the *Konsum*’s role in eliminating both private retail and the black market. Additionally, this chapter argues that the VDK initially defended the consumer co-operatives against the SED, but then became an instrument by which the SED could control the *Konsum* and its vast network of factories, outlets, and schools.

3.1. The development of the *Konsum* under the hegemony of the SED

In 1945, the *Konsum* was one of the first institutions to be (re)established by the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland* – **SMAD**). The SMAD gave the *Konsum* the difficult economic task of dealing with the immediate emergency of the postwar distribution of rationed goods. During this process,

²²² Aschhoff and Henningsen, *The German Cooperative System*: 43-45.

however, the SED stripped co-operatives of their autonomy. Though the consumer co-operative movement in Germany was traditionally representative of the working-class, it became an economic tool of the communist dictatorship during the Soviet Occupation. This subjugation continued until 1989.

3.1.1. The re-establishment of the *Konsum* and the SMAD's Order 176

The SMAD permitted the re-establishment of consumer co-operatives in the closing days of the Second World War. Given their working-class credentials, their plight at the hands of the Nazis, and their large numbers of communist members, co-operatives were perceived by the SMAD as a trustworthy working-class and antifascist organization.²²³ The party committed itself to supporting the co-operatives and making amends for their forced liquidation by the Nazis.²²⁴ Perhaps justifiably, the *Konsum* received the remaining property previously belonging to the German Worker's Front (a Nazi organization that had seized co-operative property after 1933).²²⁵ To ensure that the work of the administration of the new consumer co-operatives was in the interests of the workers, only reliable antifascists were permitted to become co-operative administrators (*Vorstand*). As Walter Ulbricht (future leader of East Germany) reported on 24 August 1946, "employees who were involved in the suppression and liquidation of the pre-Nazi co-operatives cannot be involved in the leadership of the new co-operatives. In addition, these individuals are not permitted to work in this newly founded organization."²²⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Soviets attempted to abolish private trade when they established the initial foundations of the Soviet state during the period of War Communism

²²³ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 9.

²²⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. Date not given, Genossenschaftswesen, 81.

²²⁵ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 15-16.

²²⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 guidelines given to the newly formed co-operatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled Richtlinien der SPD und KPD für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften., 2.

from 1918 to 1921. Following a similar course in their occupied territories of Germany, it is likely that the SMAD perceived consumer co-operatives as the only reliable distribution and retail partner in Germany. Moreover, the Soviets tended to believe that private and small shop owners were Nazi supporters. (There is some justification to this, since the Nazis' primary base of support came from Protestant, rural-agricultural areas of Germany, as well as small farmers, shopkeepers, and independent artisans).²²⁷ Given these Soviet perceptions of Germany, the first "ideologically acceptable" consumer co-operative was founded in Calau (a small city in Brandenburg directly south of Berlin) on 5 May 1945, three days before the end of the Second World War.²²⁸

Table 3: Members, retail outlets and regional distribution:

	31.12.1946 Members	Retail- outlets	31.12.1948 Members	Retail- Outlets	Population	Population per outlet
Berlin (Ostsektor)	109.000	210	185.000	509	1.14M (1956)	2240
Brandenburg	210.000	925	285.000	1883	2.6M (1950)	1380
Mecklenburg	64.000	359	106.000	713	2.0M (1950)	2805
Saxony	405.000	1919	534.000	2584	5.7M (1950)	2205
Saxony-Anhalt	228.000	1253	497.000	1987	4.1M (1950)	2063
Thuringia	209.000	918	324.000	1627	2.8M (1950)	1722 ²²⁹

By the end of 1945, there were already sixty-two reconstructed co-operatives with over 500,000 members in the SBZ. These first consumer co-operatives, under the tutelage of the Soviet authorities, were obligated to assist and support the emerging economic system in accordance with Marshal Zhukov's Order 176 on 18 December 1945.²³⁰ With rapidly expanding membership, retail chains, and turn-over rates, the emerging strength of the organization was

²²⁷ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 52.

²²⁸ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 13.

²²⁹ Ibid., 16.

²³⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. Date not given, Genossenschaftswesen, 81.

becoming strikingly apparent to the SED.²³¹ The preceding table below shows how the rapid expansion continued, especially in the two-year-period from the end of 1946 to the end of 1948.

The mandate or master-statute from the SMAD-Order 176 was based on the old co-operative laws from 1889. Like the original German co-operatives, these newly established co-ops were expected to sell high-quality goods at fair prices, as well as to manufacture some of these products.²³² More importantly, however, Zhukov's Order 176 stipulated that the consumer co-operatives develop into a retail trade network capable of providing the population with basic services, selling food to farmers, and supplying the cities with goods essential to daily living, and other consumer products, namely household wares and clothing.²³³

Through this Order, the status of the *Konsum* in the SBZ was elevated to an official organization for trade and production, as well as serving as a practical political partner to the ruling power of the Soviets.²³⁴ The primary function of these newly founded co-operatives was to support the Soviet Military Administration. The consumer co-operatives, according to the SMAD, were to become "democratic" (i.e., antifascist) organizations that had to support the struggle of the antifascist parties against Nazism, militarism and imperialism. As well, the new co-operatives were expected to contribute to overcoming Nazi ideology and spreading socialist ideas, especially to its primarily female clientele, workforce, and members.²³⁵

²³¹ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 9.

²³² Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 25; Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 14.

²³³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, Die Konsumgenossenschaftsbewegung in Deutschland, Berlin, 4. Februar 1948," 88. See also: "SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 9.

²³⁴ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 14.

²³⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 guidelines given to the newly formed co-operatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled Richtlinien der SPD und KPD für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften., 2.

3.1.2. The *Konsum* as a rations distributor and state-run retailer

The shoppers' dependence upon consumer co-operatives was, at first, particularly apparent, since specialty and department stores had not yet reopened following the end of the War.²³⁶ These consumer co-operatives had to deal with a precarious supply situation, which was exacerbated by the huge influx of refugees from the former German territories that the Soviets and Poles had annexed. In fact, the territory of Germany occupied by the Soviets contained nearly two million more people in 1945 than it did in 1939.²³⁷ Amid this swelling population, the *Konsum*'s distribution of food to German refugees and the general German population proved to be far from fair. That is, the *Konsum* sought to better provide for specific groups of the population who would make a direct contribution to the establishment of socialism, for example construction workers, whom the *Konsum* provided with warm meals during their day and night shifts.²³⁸



Illustration 5: A *Konsum* soup kitchen in Leipzig, 1945²³⁹

²³⁶ Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*: 21.

²³⁷ Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945-53: From antifascism to Stalinism*: 14.

²³⁸ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 140.

²³⁹ Haikal, *Gute Geschäfte*: 149.

The *Konsum*'s ever increasing economic role as a goods distributor is clearly evident in various archival documents in which top SED officials regularly recognize the growing importance of this organization. For instance, the SMAD/SED's use of the *Konsum* as a supply and rations depot is apparent in a report from 24 August 1946 entitled *Guidelines for the re-founding of the consumer co-operatives*:

The new consumer co-operatives should improve the population's supply of food and consumer goods at low prices; obtain unadulterated food for processing; avoid price increases through the regulation of purchases of products at the wholesale prices; strive for the establishment of a network of profitable distribution centres in which meat and textile products can be made available.²⁴⁰

On 9 November 1946, Paul Merker reported to Max Fechner, member of the Central Committee and city counsellor of Berlin, that consumer co-operatives had become an essential factor in the economy of the Soviet Occupation Zone.²⁴¹ Another report, dated 13 November 1946 by Politburo member Helmut Lehmann, indicates the growing economic prominence of co-operatives in the postwar period:

Given the significant meaning that co-operatives maintained for the working population, it was self-evident that the party would associate itself with this movement. Consumer co-operatives had been significantly revived throughout the SBZ and in Berlin. In 1932, the co-operative membership amounted to 938,000, whereas in 31 August 1946 it had reached 1,139,000. In 1932, the monthly turnover rate was 19 million Reich Marks. Throughout the course of the year 1946, the monthly turnover rate had increased to 77 million Reichsmark. As of 30 September 1946, the number of sales outlets amounted to 5,272. In 1932, there were only 3,556. These numbers proved the growing significance of the consumer co-operatives and their importance in the provision and distribution of basic goods.²⁴²

Furthermore, a report entitled *The Consumer Co-operative Movement in Germany* dated 4 February 1948 indicates:

²⁴⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 guidelines given to the newly formed co-operatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled *Richtlinien der SPD und KPD für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften.*, 2.

²⁴¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, *Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED*, 20.

²⁴² SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. November 13, 1946, *Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED* written by Helmut Lehmann, 21.

Consumer co-operatives had developed into a critical component of the economy by supporting the new democratic economic system of the SBZ. Their development as a party-controlled mass-organization of the working people guaranteed state control and the just distribution of rationed goods. They were obligated to distribute scarce goods, namely textiles and shoes to workers in vital industries.²⁴³

While these quotations give the impression of the increasing importance of co-operatives as a goods distributor, this may not necessarily have been true. In fact, the preceding documents and quotations may be evidence of the manner in which SED officials communicated with *Konsum* officials and the perceptions that both parties wanted to portray concerning this organization. More broadly, SED and *Konsum* officials were developing socialist discourse or *DDR Deutsch* in the nascent milieu of the socialist dictatorship during the late 1940s. In particular in the preceding quotation, we see politicized terms like “democratic,” “party-controlled mass-organization,” and “state control.” *Konsum* documents from later decades become even more tied to the linguistic style of the Soviet Bloc as Americans are continually referred to as imperialists, the West Germans as fascists, and the Soviet Union as the benevolent mentor, guarantor of world peace, and the communist big brother. In describing *DDR Deutsch*, historian Konrad H. Jarausch notes, “it was [the] language – full of Soviet imports, Marxist-Leninist phrases, SED-slogans, and East German regionalisms – that seemed odd.”²⁴⁴

3.1.3. Elimination of the black market and private trade

To serve the SED, the *Konsum* had to oppose what the party perceived as “overcharging by private capitalists” and to eliminate the black market.²⁴⁵ As indicated by an internal party

²⁴³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Die Konsumgenossenschaftsbewegung in Deutschland, Berlin, 4. Februar 1948, 104.

²⁴⁴ Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*: 70.

²⁴⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vortrag für Vorstandsitzung der Kammer am 27. Oktober 1947: Einzelhandel und Konsumgenossenschaften im Dienste der Verbraucher, 54.

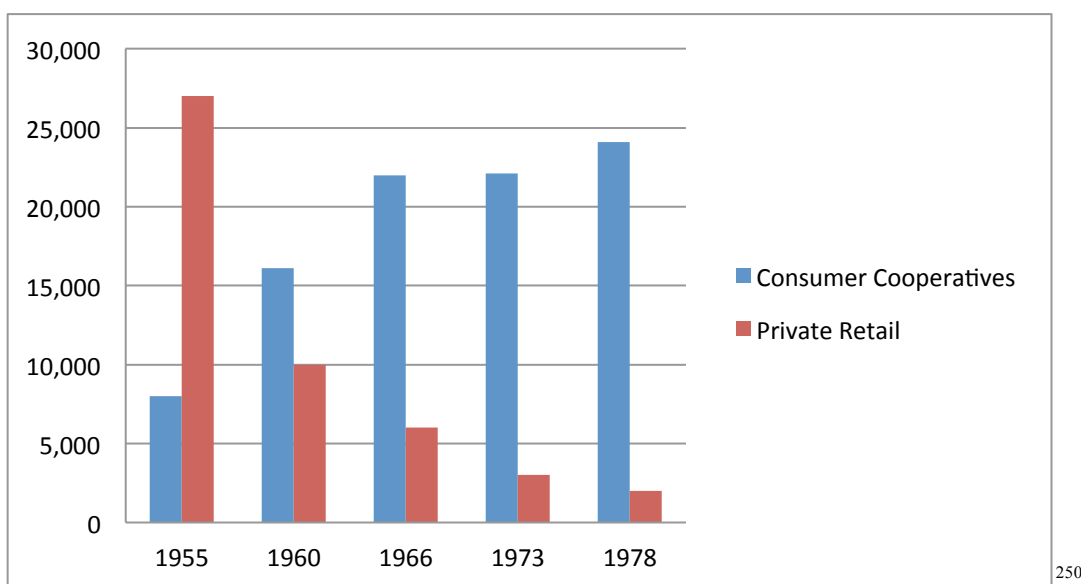
document from the Department of Political Economy from 1946, the rural consumer co-operatives, although not a means of bringing about the socialist economy, were fully capable of opposing private capitalists in the area of goods distribution.²⁴⁶ In Saxony in May 1946, for instance, the consumer co-operatives were ordered to conduct a propaganda campaign against black marketeers by providing information to functionaries and active members through a regularly published *Mitteilungsblatt* (newspaper); the following year, this department instructed the *Konsum* to oppose private industry directly by providing its members with quality, unadulterated goods at the cheapest price possible, as well as to produce food and consumer articles.²⁴⁷ In 1948, the *Konsum* continued to lower prices for textiles and shoes to force private retailers to follow suit.²⁴⁸ In spite of this, the *Konsum* was incapable of fulfilling the needs of consumers during the postwar years, forcing the party to continue permitting private stores to supply the majority of consumers. However, with each successive wave of socialist construction in the following decades, the government applied more pressure on private retailers to join the state-run *Konsum* and incorporate private enterprise into the state-controlled retail system.²⁴⁹ The following graph illustrates the continual decline of private enterprise and the increase of state/socialist retail during the 1950s to the end of the 1970s:

²⁴⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vorlage an das Zentralsekretariat, Betr.: Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 5.9.1946, 1-2.

²⁴⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Bericht: Über die Zonenkonferenz der Konsumgenossenschaften in Berlin am 14.9.1948," 19. See also "SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vortrag für Vorstandsitzung der Kammer am 27. Oktober 1947: Einzelhandel und Konsumgenossenschaften im Dienste der Verbraucher, 52-53.

²⁴⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, Zur Diskussion über die Vorbereitung der Parteikonferenz: "Die Verbesserung der Arbeit der Konsumgenossenschaften" Berlin, 16. November 1948, 140.

²⁴⁹ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 252.

Table 4: The number and type of retail outlets

Another aim of eliminating the black market was to bring customers into a readily observable space in which they could be controlled and surveyed. In this sense, *Konsum* architecture became similar to philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison. The essential feature of Bentham's prison was that the guards would be able to view the prisoners at all times, but that the prisoners would be unable to see the guards and so would not know if and when they were under surveillance. In a similar sense, the *Konsum* created sites and spaces in which saleswomen, other customers, and the state's security services easily observed customers.²⁵¹ Labelling the *Konsum* as a Foucauldian disciplinary institution would be an overstatement, but the *Konsum* was a site in which there was a continual presence of what Michel Foucault described as a "normalizing gaze" of surveillance that made it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish."²⁵² Stasi files support this contention and indicate that there was a great deal of observing and classifying taking place in these stores in order to monitor

²⁵⁰ Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 166.

²⁵¹ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 613-14.

²⁵² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 184.

deviance or dissatisfaction amongst the population. For instance, an unofficial collaborator – code named “Barbara Wagner” – gave weekly reports on the mood and behaviour of the customers in the town of Bad Elster on the German-Czechoslovak border.²⁵³ In this way, the *Konsum* brought the consuming population away from the black market and into the view of the state, thereby creating a sort of dialogue between the customer and the régime via the communication channel of the embedded Stasi informants (an examination of the Stasi in the *Konsum* is further discussed in sections 8.4.1. and 9.4.1).

3.2. The democratic centralization of consumer co-operatives

The SED was able to strengthen its hold on power and infiltrate once relatively independent organizations through a process of democratic centralization. Like most associations, the *Konsum* was organized on the basis of hierarchy with power concentrated at the top. However, “democratic centralism” (a term adopted by Lenin and common currency throughout the Communist bloc) meant that open discussion was possible only until a higher rank of the organization reached a decision. At this point, the decision was binding and all lower party agencies and members were forced to implement it without question.²⁵⁴ Although considered “democratic” by the ruling elite since it expressed the will of the workers and peasants, this system of rule was generally authoritarian, and it ensured that the party dominated the state and society. Following the war, the concept of “democratic centralism,” which was also considered antifascist, formed the basis of political reorganization in the SBZ along communist lines. Democratic centralism was the basic organising principle of the SBZ/DDR; it was designed to maximize SED domination of political, societal, and economic institutions. During the Soviet occupation, all political parties and mass-organizations were structured hierarchically

²⁵³ BStU - BV-Karl-Marx-Stadt Oelsnitz XIV 1416/76 I/II, Stimmungen und Meinungen, 28.7.82, 433.

²⁵⁴ Brown, *The Rise and Fall of Communism*: 107.

and in accordance with the guidelines of democratic centralism – the *Konsum* was no exception.²⁵⁵

3.2.1. The removal of opponents and the increase of SED influence within the *Konsum*

In order to “democratically centralize” or, perhaps more accurately, stalinize the *Konsum*, the SED gave long-standing party members leadership roles in the reformed co-operatives. By directly controlling administrative selection from above, the Soviets ensured that the East German co-operative organization supported the emerging communist régime in the Soviet Occupation Zone.²⁵⁶ Historian Mustafa Haikal notes that by 1946 the most important personnel decisions already fell outside of the administration of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* and had to be confirmed by the party.²⁵⁷ Helmut Lehmann, the Central Secretariat of the SED in Berlin, demanded that the consumer co-operatives be filled with SED functionaries in order for the SMAD to officially recognize the organization. As he put it in a speech dated 6 June 1947:

The party acted as a mediator between the workers’ movement and the Soviet occupying power. The party was prepared to help the co-operatives in their attempt to receive recognition by the occupying power and to defend co-operative claims in reference to property that the Soviets sequestered. In return, the co-operatives had to fulfill their duties within the workers’ movement. We, therefore, demand that our members of the SED also become socialist functionaries within the co-operatives, which was the only guarantee that the co-operatives properly fulfill their duties and obligations.²⁵⁸

These leading co-operators had to prove that they were politically loyal while under the direct scrutiny of the SED security apparatus (secret police, prisons, and extensive networks of informers).²⁵⁹ The secretary of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Sirow*, Comrade Donner, was a case in point. For not “being up to the challenge of his obligations” (*seiner Aufgabe in keiner Weise*

²⁵⁵ Jan Palmowski, "Regional Identities and the Limits of Democratic Centralism in the GDR," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 3 (2006): 503-04.

²⁵⁶ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 9.

²⁵⁷ Haikal, *Gute Geschäfte*: 158.

²⁵⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Protokoll über die Konferenz der Konsum-Genossenschaftsverbände in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone in Schwerin/Meckl. Am Donnerstag, dem 5. Juni und Freitag, dem 6. Juni 1947, 34.

²⁵⁹ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 13.

gewachsen), he subsequently drew the attention of the regional administration of the party and was placed under the direct control of a Comrade Grohn. To ensure the loyalty of this co-operative, the SED embedded eleven party members into its administration.²⁶⁰ Historian Gareth Pritchard argued that the SED displayed skill and patience in the removal of opponents. In his judgement, “the Soviets and the KPD/SED leadership took great care to avoid provoking all their real or potential opponents at the same time, but instead, using what the Hungarian Communist leader Matyas Rakosi called ‘salami tactics,’ non- or anti-Stalinist political tendencies were sliced off the body politic one by one.”²⁶¹ The SED applied these “salami tactics” to the consumer co-operatives throughout the postwar years by removing “disloyal” employees, demanding the loyalty of co-op managers, and inserting party members into the upper echelons of the *Konsum*.²⁶² An official party document dated December 1948 states:

The functionaries of our party had to attain administrative positions in the consumer co-operatives. Only when the tight coordination of the work of functionaries was successful could the leading role of the party have been further developed in the consumer co-operatives in order to assure that the interests of the workers were met.²⁶³

To aid in the party’s internal encroachment on the *Konsum*, the SED and the Department of Trade and Provision also gave party members within the organization specific instructions:

All members of the Socialist Unity Party who were active in the consumer co-operatives had to clearly understand that they were obligated to uphold the leading role of the party within the co-operative organization. That is to say, these functionaries were responsible for the implementation of the party’s and the government’s will in the co-operative workplace. That meant that co-ops were messengers of the party’s politics and ideology, and that employees and members must be exemplary socialists. It was

²⁶⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given) Wie wird die führende Rolle der Partei der Arbeiterklasse in den konsumgenossenschaftlichen Organisationen des Bezirksverbandes Neubrandenburg verwirklicht., 4.

²⁶¹ Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945-53: From antifascism to Stalinism*: 229.

²⁶² SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 22, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 5.

²⁶³ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, An das Zentralsekretariat der SED, z.Hd. des Genossen Stoph, Berlin N 54, Lothringer Str. 1., 7. Dez. 48, 167.

also compulsory for co-operatives to be actively involved in the development of socialism, and to help thwart the class enemy's attacks on our régime.²⁶⁴

Undoubtedly, it can be inferred that most *Konsum* managers likely became SED members in order to retain their jobs or for career advancement. Nevertheless, the number of party members within the *Konsum* increased, thereby increasing the SED's control to, as historian Brett Fairbairn estimates, around eighty to ninety percent of the administrative positions, all the while eliminating Social Democratic influence.²⁶⁵

In the summer of 1948, SED party bosses removed co-operators they deemed to be too Social Democratic or too closely connected with the West German co-operative organization. In 1949, during a show-trial in Leipzig, many co-operative leaders with Social-Democratic ties were removed or imprisoned.²⁶⁶ An illustration of this is the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig*, where a complete expulsion of an entire generation of co-operative leaders took place on account of their affiliation with the SPD. In total, five top administrators, eight members of the supervisory committee, five departmental leaders, two sales-outlet inspectors and several employees were forcibly removed from their work. In the two years between 1948 and 1950, the SED had by and large removed social democratic influences from within the Leipzig consumer co-operative.²⁶⁷ As Wolfgang Richter, the head-administrator of the Eilenburg consumer co-operative from 1974 to 2003, stated in an interview in 2004:

The influence of the party within this organization was incredibly strong. The number of the SED in the upper echelons of the co-operative administration was always above fifty percent; therefore, the SED maintained a majority within the organization.

²⁶⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given) Wie wird die führende Rolle der Partei der Arbeiterklasse in den konsumgenossenschaftlichen Organisationen des Bezirksverbandes Neubrandenburg verwirklicht., 1.

²⁶⁵ Fairbairn, "Popular Participation and Political Cultures: Co-operative Enterprises and the State in the Two Germanies, 1945-1990," 6.

²⁶⁶ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 12.

²⁶⁷ Adam and Jaunich, "Die Leipziger Bau- und Konsumgenossenschaften," 209.

Consequently, when there were crucial votes regarding personnel elections, SED members always toed the party line.²⁶⁸

To ensure SED loyalty in the lower- and midlevels of the *Konsum*, the party undertook a number of effective measures. First, it established and inserted sub-party organizations or small party cells (*Grundorganisation*). Members of the sub-party organizations had to take special courses in Marxism-Leninism. In turn, members of these sub-party organizations were charged with spreading these teachings amongst their fellow colleagues.²⁶⁹ Second, the SED increased its influence in the *Konsum* by demanding the political loyalty of those seeking higher promotion. Third, the open presence and constant “gaze” of the SED and Stasi were weapons used to ensure loyalty. For instance, the *Konsum* inserted within every co-operative qualified party members and Stasi functionaries to solidify the leading role of the party.²⁷⁰ In fact, the SED actually measured its influence within the *Konsum* based on the level of Stasi infiltration. In August 1960, for instance, the Stasi reported that the influence of the party was particularly strong within the administration of *Konsum-Mitte-Berlin*. However, the party’s influence within *Konsum-Mitte-Berlin*’s sales outlets was weak. To help spread the influence of the party, it used Socialist work brigades (this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 9). As of November 1960, for instance, there were eighty-six brigades embedded in various retail outlets within this co-operative.²⁷¹

The ultimate key to SED control of the *Konsum* was ultimately the establishment of a centralized umbrella organization under the direct control of the party – *Verband Deutscher*

²⁶⁸ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 69.

²⁶⁹ SWA: 21123 SED-Bezirksleitung Leipzig Nr. IV/B/2/3/061, Maßnahmen für den Parteaufbau in den Konsumgenossenschaften des Bezirkes, Leipzig, den 7.11.1968, 1-2.

²⁷⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given) Wie wird die führende Rolle der Partei der Arbeiterklasse in den konsumgenossenschaftlichen Organisationen des Bezirksverbandes Neubrandenburg verwirklicht., 5.

²⁷¹ BStU - MfS Zentralarchiv 2493/67, Analyse Konsumgenossenschaft - Mitte, Berlin den 8.11.1960, 30-31.

Konsumgenossenschaften (VDK). In fact, the party clearly indicated in archival documents, “the leading posts of this organization were to be filled with ‘reliable’ party members.”²⁷²

3.2.2. Democratic centralism and the establishment of the VDK

The VDK, the *Konsum*’s centralized administrative organ, was ultimately responsible for determining the political role of the *Konsum*. It alone determined and controlled the ideological and propaganda functions of the *Konsum*, including the political and antifascist education of its members. The VDK forced the consumer co-operatives into supporting the SED’s ideology.²⁷³ As will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, the VDK also created and was responsible for an extensive network of schools to educate members and functionaries in practical and ideological matters.²⁷⁴ This education of members and workers was intended to strengthen the *Konsum* as a mass-organization and to garner membership and employee support for the party.²⁷⁵ This organization ultimately set the agenda of the entire network of consumer co-operatives and transformed them into a politically and economically subservient tool.

The VDK was founded in August 1949 on the principles of democratic centralism in order to further centralize control of the consumer co-operatives under the auspices of the SED.²⁷⁶ The VDK functioned as a parent organization of the entire Union of the Consumer Co-operatives (see the chart at beginning of this chapter), and it administered the fifteen regional co-operative associations, determined the long-term objectives of the *Konsum*, and realized and implemented the resolutions of the SED. It also ran the *Konsum*’s Department for Agitation and Advertising (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7), which had the explicit goal of educating members,

²⁷² SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, *Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED*, 9.

²⁷³ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 20.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ LAB: C Rep. 901 Nr. 328, *Vertreterwahlen 1950*, 6.

²⁷⁶ Christian Ludz, Johannes Kuppe, and Germany (West). Bundesministerium für Innerdeutsche Beziehungen., *DDR Handbuch* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1975).

consumers, and workers in Marxism-Leninism and persuading members to actively participate in various activities.²⁷⁷

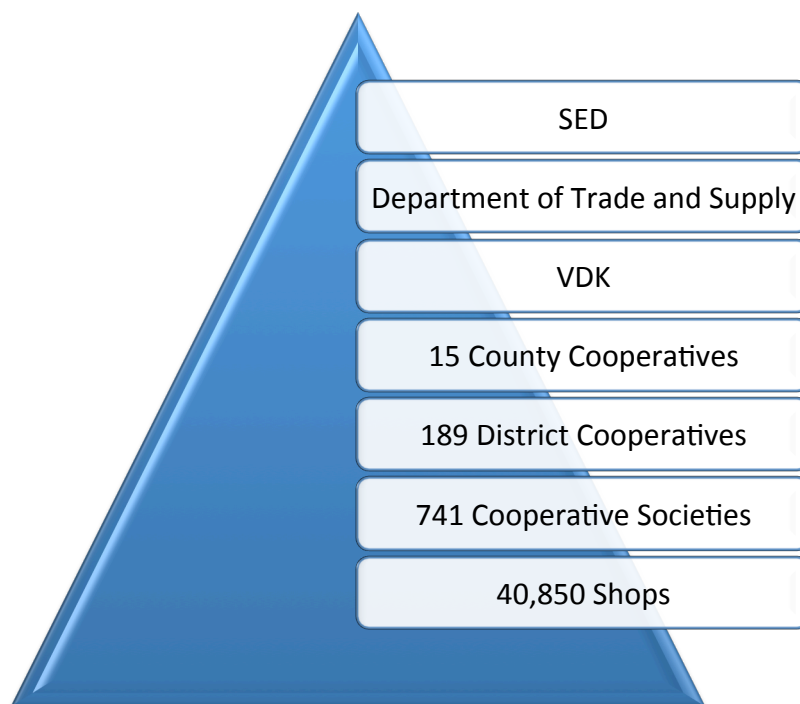


Table 5: Leadership structure of the *Konsumgenossenschaften*
The SED gave direction at each level to both the government and *Konsum* organs.²⁷⁸

Through the establishment of the VDK, the conditions were set for the complete inclusion of the consumer co-operatives into the system for centralized state planning, including the two-year-plan of 1949/50.²⁷⁹ Because the consumer co-operatives were directly involved in the régime's economic plans, the VDK also had the task of drawing up economic goals that it had to implement and fulfill.²⁸⁰ While there may have been some flexibility in developing these plans, the state and its planning authorities always had the power to either reject or have them

²⁷⁷ Romana Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel: Zur Geschichte der Schaufenstergestaltung in DDR am Fallbeispiel des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften im Zeitraum von 1949 bis 1989* (Berlin: VDM, 2009), 45-46.

²⁷⁸ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 105.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 26; Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 22.

²⁸⁰ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 15-16.

implemented.²⁸¹ And by the end of the 1940s, the party introduced the law “On the Improvement of the Supplying of the Population,” which brought consumer co-operatives under the complete control of the SED. Although the *Konsum* could make proposals and requests to the planning system, these were subject to the approval of the Department of Trade and Supply (see Table 4). At the local, regional, and national levels, co-operatives had to submit their plans to their respective planning authority. And so, as previously mentioned, by the early 1950s, the *Konsum* was becoming a centralized, hierarchical system.²⁸²

Table 4 further illustrates that the VDK was economically subordinate to the state and its planning authorities in the Department for Trade and Supply. In 1952, the subordination became more pronounced as the SED transformed the *Konsum* into a five-tiered hierarchy with the VDK at the top, followed by regional federations, district federations, primary co-operatives and local sales points. With each level subordinate to the level above, consumer co-operatives in East Germany – rather than being representative of the values put forward in the Rochdale co-operative principles – were more comparable to Stalinism or, to use Soviet terminology, democratic centralism. In addition, co-operatives were forced to reorganize their administrative boundaries so as to align with those of the state. This helped facilitate close collaboration between the régime and the *Konsum* at each administrative level. Because of the increasingly close collaboration between co-operatives and the state, the *Konsum* became a tool for the social, political, and attitudinal transformations that were directed from above by the party elite, and which were the primary objectives of every mass-organization in the DDR.²⁸³ (See the following chapter for an in-depth discussion of the *Konsum* as a mass-organization).

²⁸¹ Ibid., 26-27.

²⁸² Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 10.

²⁸³ Ibid., 11-13.

The administration of the VDK was given the direct task of politically mobilizing its membership and forced the further integration of the *Konsum* into the command economy.²⁸⁴ This coercion was based on the régime's need for co-ops to help solve the urgent postwar supply problems. As a result of its increasing importance in the economy, the state played a direct role in the development of the *Konsum* and its absorption into the centrally planned economy.²⁸⁵ The *Konsum*, according to Ulrich Kurzer's publication, quickly and resolutely contributed to the DDR's rising standard of living in the years and decades following the Second World War.²⁸⁶ He states, "of course the *Konsum* was part of the economic and social history of East Germany, particularly before the founding of the state. Nevertheless, after the *Wende*, the *Konsum* was not impacted by discussions or implications about its political past."²⁸⁷ Furthermore, in his concise study of the former East German co-operatives, Gerhard Rönnebeck points out, that the VDK's system of governance (democratic centralism) "not only ignored traditional co-operative philosophy, trade and retail practices, but it also integrated and incorporated this once independent German mass movement into the East German political and economic apparatus."²⁸⁸ This system remained in place until the fall of communism in 1989.

3.2.3. Opposition to the VDK and SED within the *Konsum*

Historian Brett Fairbairn argues that the VDK initially defended the interests of co-ops against the SED and the state's increasing infringement. For example, senior officials of the VDK complained that they were being ill-treated by the state, and in 1950 they angrily claimed "that officials of the DDR are not acting as democrats and are not making decisions as

²⁸⁴ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 23.

²⁸⁵ Cooperative members were also concerned about being placed in a secondary role to the Handelsorganisation (HO). Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 23.

²⁸⁶ Ulrich Kurzer, "War der Konsum etwas Besonderes für die Ostdeutschen?," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR* ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar: Böhlau 2006), 124.

²⁸⁷ Kaltenborn, *Genossenschaftsrecht und Modernisierung*: 14.

²⁸⁸ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 41.

democrats. Consumer co-operatives have the duty to inform the public of this fact.”²⁸⁹ Fairbairn states, “the reason for this evolution was simple: consumer co-operatives were too large for an increasingly totalitarian state to leave them alone.”²⁹⁰ During this time, the VDK was free to determine and develop the Co-operative Master-Statutes and was responsible for every decision that fell to co-operative trade.²⁹¹

There is also evidence of opposition to the dominance of the SED within the *Konsum*. The consumer co-operative movement in Germany was one of the oldest in the world, so it may have proved somewhat resistant to complete subordination to the Soviet and Stalinist traditions. In fact, there is proof of resistance during an incident in 1950. At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Arnstadt*, there were stormy scenes at a meeting of the SED factory cell when an elderly comrade began to threaten and abuse a younger SED member who had been passing information related to deviant opinions in the group to the district leadership (*Kreisleitung*).²⁹² Archival sources further suggest that there was opposition to the party’s invasion of the *Konsum*. For instance, reports from the VDK entitled *How will the leading roles of the SED be realized in the consumer co-operatives of Neubrandenburg* state:

In the working/party organization of the co-operatives in the region of Neubrandenburg, the political and ideological work of the party had been weakly developed. Although 62.5 percent of the leading functionaries in the district organization and co-operatives were party members, and although the district leadership was comprised of party comrades, these functionaries were suffering from a blatant disregard of the party’s authority.²⁹³

²⁸⁹ Fairbairn, “Co-operative Values and the Cold War,” 7. As quoted in “Diskussion auf der gemeinschaftlichen Sitzung von Aufsichtsrat und Vorstand des V.D.K. in Berlin am 12.5.50 zum Thema ‘Schwerpunktaufgaben der Planung’,” in BArch Berlin, DL-1 Nr. 3645.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 10.

²⁹¹ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 19.

²⁹² Pritchard, *The making of the GDR, 1945-53: From antifascism to Stalinism*: 173.

²⁹³ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given) Wie wird die führende Rolle der Partei der Arbeiterklasse in den konsumgenossenschaftlichen Organisationen des Bezirksverbandes Neubrandenburg verwirklicht., 2.

The report continues: “the party’s work in the consumer co-operatives was, in most cases, fully inadequate. Moreover, there were only three party members in the administration. The chief executive and current party secretary, comrade Helburg, went against the will of the party by fleeing to West Germany.”²⁹⁴

There were multiple instances of party members lamenting the disinterest of co-operative workers and members. In one such example, the party noted, “The scheduled party work in the majority of the consumer co-operatives was inadequate. The leading party members in the co-operative district associations had little interest in the completion of ideological work.”²⁹⁵ Another report written by N. Stiehler, a member of the administration, bemoaned the lack of political and ideological interest amongst leading *Genossen* (comrades and members) in the *Konsum*. In fact, Stiehler demanded that they develop an improved “socialist attitude” towards their work.²⁹⁶ Generally speaking, this opposition led to a low turnout at factory assemblies and party and union meetings.²⁹⁷ Specifically, an internal document dated December 1947 reveals the party was frustrated by a lack of participation in women’s groups. “The collaboration of women in the consumer co-operatives was below expectations,” according to the document, and “the creation of women’s groups is still suffering from apparent shortcomings and disinterest.”²⁹⁸ A report from the Department of Economics also identifies a dearth of interest in the party’s ideological work that could be perceived as unenthusiastic support or perhaps even foot-

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 3.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁹⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8991, Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR, Berlin, den 11.9.1986, Niederschrift über die Beratung des Vorstandes des VdK mit den Vorstandsvorsitzenden der Bezirksverbände, dem Vorstandsvorsitzenden der KG Berlin, dem Generaldirektor des ZU "konsument" und dem Direktor des Konsum-Bauarbeiterversorgungsbetriebes Berlin am 3. September 1986 im "konsument" - Warenhaus Am Brühl in Leipzig, 189.

²⁹⁷ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 99.

²⁹⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Wiederschrift über die am Donnerstag, dem 11.9. und Freitag, den 12.9.47 in Kühlungsborn/Meckl. stattgefundenen Beiratssitzung des Konsum-Hauptsekretariats der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und des sowjetischen Sektors der Stadt Berlin., 15.

dragging. It states, “The fundamental weaknesses of the consumer co-operatives continue to be a lack of ideological clarity amongst the workers and members. Therefore, ideological work needs to be brought to the foreground to garner their support.”²⁹⁹

It should, however, be underlined that these sources may indicate not that dissent was real, but rather that some functionaries (the authors of these documents) could advance themselves by accusing others of feigned support. Be that as it may, historian Andreas Ludwig maintains, “In the early 1950s, during the high-phase of Stalinism, some co-operators openly opposed and criticized the state.”³⁰⁰ In an interview, Dr. Burchard Bösche, an executive in the Hamburg-based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*, also describes the *Konsum* as something akin to a shelter or hideout (*Unterschlupf*) for people with negative political credentials and personal biographies. He states:

There were many people who were critical of the SED system, and they found refuge and work in the *Konsum*. For a long time, I was in contact with the chairman of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Bezirk-Leipzig*. Since he was in an American POW camp and suspected to have participated in the 17 June 1953 Uprising, he was not allowed to work in other state-owned-industry. Nevertheless, he had a very successful career in the *Konsum*.³⁰¹

Unsurprisingly, some members and workers felt a strong sense of loyalty to this organization due to its co-operative principles and goals.³⁰²

3.3. The *Konsum* and its relationship to other forms of East German retail

From 1945 to 1948, German consumers had little choice between *Konsum* stores and private stores. In the words of historian Mark Landsman “consumer co-operatives offered the

²⁹⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, Zur Diskussion über die Vorbereitung der Parteikonferenz: “Die Verbesserung der Arbeit der Konsumgenossenschaften“ Berlin, 16. November 1948, 141.

³⁰⁰ Ludwig, “Nicht mehr verteilen -- sondern verkaufen,” 25.

³⁰¹ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Vorstandsmitglied - Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

³⁰² Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.; “Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Vorstandsmitglied - Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

only alternative to small-scale private shopkeepers.”³⁰³ In 1948, however, the SED established the State Trade Organization (*Handelsorganisation*, **HO**). These shops resembled Western stores and were often called “a piece of the West in the East.”³⁰⁴ The best locations in the cities were reserved for the HO, whereas the *Konsum* was responsible for the provision of the countryside. There was a continual struggle about the shop locations in the cities, and which organization could bring in more profit. The *Konsum* perpetually made the argument that they had millions of members, and that these people not only lived in the rural towns, but also in the cities.³⁰⁵ In 1956, a *Klein Krieg* (small war) broke out between the *Konsum* and the HO. During this so-called “small war,” the *Konsum* fought for greater independence from the Ministry for Trade and Provision, as well as the local state authorities.³⁰⁶ Gradually, the HO was able to overtake the *Konsum* in sales. Both organisations maintained around thirty-five percent of the total retail sale in the DDR, and this number fluctuated minimally throughout the remaining lifespan of the state. By the 1960s, the conflict between the *Konsum* and the HO largely came to an end. Following that, the *Konsum* worked seemingly well with the state authorities and the HO.³⁰⁷

The role the *Konsum* played and its history can be divided into two periods. For example, the consumer cooperatives were given elevated status within the SBZ; however, because the state perceived cooperatives as a ‘lower form of socialist property,’ they were later put at a continual disadvantage with their primary competitor – the HO. Already by 1951, the influence of the party and the cooperatives role in the ‘Building of Socialism’ was clearly established and defined. That is to say, in the eyes of the SED, the primary task of the *Konsum* was not in the

³⁰³ Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*: 21.

³⁰⁴ Ciesla and Poutrus, “Food Supply in a Planned Economy,” 146.

³⁰⁵ Werner Müller, “>>Die ökonomische Qualität war eindeutig<< Interview mit Werner Müller,” in *Konsum. Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar: Böhlau, 2006), 175.

³⁰⁶ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 35.

³⁰⁷ Fairbairn, “Co-operative Values and the Cold War,” 12.

provision of goods for the population, but in the struggle for peace, solidarity, and the unity of Germany.³⁰⁸ At first, the cooperatives were gradually incorporated into the political and economic system, during which the SED influence in them continually rose. The cooperatives were also incorporated into the SED's propaganda apparatus. The second phase began with the dismissal of Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker in 1971. With the change of leadership of the SED party-state, Honecker, at the Eighth Party Congress of the SED (1971), proclaimed his program for the establishment of '*Einheit von Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik*' (a program of 'consumer socialism'). Thereafter, the *Konsum* was able to focus on economic tasks and their ideological and political demands became secondary.³⁰⁹

As discussed in section 2.1.10, the provision of commodities in the consumer co-operatives grew even more difficult with the introduction of state owned *Exquisit-Laden*, *Intershops*, and *Delikat* shops. To shop in these stores, one either needed access to Western currency, or privileged access and status often related to party connections.³¹⁰ As a result of these new stores, consumer society in the DDR was further stratified and became a three-tier system, with the *Konsum* functioning as a third-rate or third-tier store next to the second-tier stores of the HO. To make matters worse for the average consumer (i.e., those without access to West German currency), highly valued products were withdrawn from the assortment of goods produced by and available in the *Konsum* for the benefit of these newly established shops in which foreign money was used. The *Exquisit-Laden* shops soaked up the population's excess buying power in East German Marks, whereas, starting in the mid-1970s, the régime developed the *Intershops* with the intention of absorbing the growing quantity of West German Marks

³⁰⁸ Sabine Hödt, "Konsummarken kleben," in *Wunderwirtschaft: DDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren* (Köln: Böhlau, 1996), 123.

³⁰⁹ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 18.

³¹⁰ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 193.

coming into the country. In order to increase foreign currency reserves, the régime enlarged the network of *Intershops* following the construction of the Berlin Wall. Initially, the state restricted the access of East German citizens to these shops, but in 1973 the régime legalized the possession of Western currency and actually encouraged East Germans to spend in these shops.³¹¹ By conceding a large role in retail to the *Intershops*, the SED created and increased social stratification, which advantaged those with direct access to western currency. In fact, this system stymied patrons of the *Konsum* who may have been loyal to the régime, while privileging consumers with Western contacts.³¹² By the 1980s, the availability of goods further diminished in the *Konsum* shops, because these products could be bought only at inflated prices in the luxury *Exquisit-Laden* and *Intershops*.³¹³

Following the demise of the East German state, the *Treuhand* (the Trust agency that privatized East German enterprises) dissolved the HO.³¹⁴ During the *Wende*, it was difficult for the *Konsum* administrators and the *Treuhand* to determine which property belonged to the *Konsum* and what was state owned. In most cases, the co-operatives established new branches on property that was previously owned and controlled by the HO.³¹⁵

3.4. Conclusions

Consumers had very little choice between the *Konsum* and other forms of private and state retail; hence, they were largely dependent upon the *Konsum* outlets established at the onset of the Soviet occupation. When there was a choice, it usually would have been between an HO shop and a *Konsum* shop and in many places it was only the *Konsum* shop. Likely, the only

³¹¹ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 28; Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 142.

³¹² Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 256-57.

³¹³ George Last, *After the "Socialist Spring:" Collectivisation and Economic Transformation in the GDR*, 1st ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 209.

³¹⁴ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 5.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

other remaining option for the consumer was to travel to the next big city for shopping. But since the majority of people had full-time jobs, and shops closed at 6pm, this was not really a plausible possibility for the majority of the population. Consumers' dependence upon the *Konsum* remained largely intact for much of the history of the DDR. For instance, consumers especially relied on the *Konsum* for the provision of bread. In Bezirk Frankfurt, Neubrandenburg, and Magdeburg, the population received over half of their daily intake of meat products and over a quarter of their baked goods from the *Dorfkonsumgenossenschaften* (rural co-operatives). These examples clearly indicate East Germans' dependence upon the *Konsum*. Accordingly, the *Konsum*'s impact on daily life should not be underestimated.³¹⁶

By 1989, the *Konsum* had made a considerable contribution to the state economy by controlling 31.3 percent of all retail sales; 38.4 percent of food sales; 24.6 percent of industrial products; there were 198 co-operatives; 32,000 retail outlets; and 13 *Konsum* department stores (called *konsument*).³¹⁷ These numbers represent state-driven from above rather than membership-driven growth from below, which was in direct violation of co-operative ideology and guidelines. Economically, the *Konsum* could sell only what it could buy from the state (i.e., the state defined what the *Konsum* was expected to produce and what the *Konsum* had to sell). Moreover, the *Konsum* had to compete with private retail for its share of goods from state suppliers and wholesalers. By favouring the *Konsum* with supplies and propaganda over privately owned retail, the SED used the co-operative outlets as a means to deliver goods to a

³¹⁶ Erich Klose, "Zu einigen Aufgaben der konsumgenossenschaftlichen Produktion," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 41.

³¹⁷ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*. # 33-34; Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 31.

destitute population whilst eliminating what the party perceived as capitalist retail and the black market.³¹⁸

Even though the *Konsum* was beholden to the party in its upper administrative levels, later chapters will show that there was a relatively high level of customer participation, a voluntary-membership-base, and membership control of *Konsum* retail outlets by virtue of elected membership committees (i.e., these shops were local self-organizations at the lower levels in which the SED did not intervene). While there were instances of opposition to Stalinism, the process of democratically centralising the *Konsum* proved to bring this organization effectively under the direct control of SED-state. Moreover, consumer co-operatives evidently served the SED by performing the following: allocating goods in an ever-increasing amount to the workers, supporting the state's economic endeavours, promoting class-consciousness, and (as will be a continual theme in the ensuing chapters) politicizing and educating the working-class.³¹⁹ Part II continues with these themes and shows how they became interwoven with aspects of persuasion and pacification.

³¹⁸ Katherine Pence, "Women on the Verge: Consumers between Private Desires and Public Crisis," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 290. See also Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 223.

³¹⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 22, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 5.

PART II: PERSUASION

What the state tried – the subordination of the *Konsum* to the realization of state goals

4. *DDR Deutsch*: the *Konsum* as a mass-organization, cultural centre, and mobilizing force

I enjoyed *Konsum* cultural activities. I remember celebrating my children's end-of-the-year school parties in a *Konsum* restaurant. These restaurants were especially popular in the countryside during the harvest season.

- An anonymous interviewee³²⁰

The building of socialism in the DDR requires the development of socialist personalities amongst our people. However, the socialist consciousness does not develop spontaneously; rather it has to be patiently and persistently cultivated. For this reason, a great deal of attention and resources need to be directed into the *Konsum* membership meetings.

- A document from the Sachsen state archives in Chemnitz and the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Gornsdorf*, 21 June 1958³²¹



Illustration 6: *Konsum* cultural activities in front of the slogan “The support of cultural activities is an important task of the *Konsum*”³²²

³²⁰ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

³²¹ SSC: 30878/1077/2, Ergänzung zur Arbeitsentschließung der Delegiertenversammlung der Konsumgenossenschaft Gornsdorf am 21. Juni 1958, 1.

³²² SSC: 30878/1148/5, III/36 (Date not given - likely the 1950s).

This chapter examines the political and propagandistic role of the *Konsum* as a mass-organization and cultural centre on a domestic level. It also explores the manner in which the *Konsum* transmitted the SED's ideological messages through membership meetings and cultural activities. Hence, this chapter raises the following question: was the *Konsum* able to effectively carry out the role expected of all DDR mass-organizations, namely to function as what Lenin described as a "transmission-belt" of propaganda from the vanguard party to the *Konsum*'s mass membership?³²³ To answer this question, the research utilized for this chapter is drawn primarily from the perspective of the state, with some references to interviews and attendance numbers from *Konsum* political meetings and cultural activities. In other words, this chapter primarily deals with the state and the *Konsum*'s intentions to persuade, though there are some references to reactions.

In some ways, the *Konsum* and its role as a mass-organization reflected the tensions between attempted totalitarianism and selective participation. On the one hand, the *Konsum* was attempting to control and politicize leisure time. Still, as this chapter will show, people had the ability to participate on their own terms and in ways of their own choosing. And for many, this participation was fun. In some ways, therefore, I would argue that the *Konsum* did articulate some of the interests of its members in what might be described as a nascent civil society.

4.1. Mass membership

Owing to its widespread membership base, the *Konsum* became an important economic and political institution for its members in the SBZ and the DDR.³²⁴ Any East German over the age of sixteen – regardless of background, political ideology, and party membership – was

³²³ For a detailed analysis of the *Konsum*'s annual membership growth See Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 28-29.

³²⁴ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 26-29.

eligible for membership in the *Konsum*.³²⁵ There were concrete advantages to being a *Konsum* member such as rebates, reduced prices, and primarily the membership refund (members received a membership rebate of as much as two to three percent of the *Konsum* turnover).³²⁶

The *Konsum*'s open membership policy resulted in the swelling of its ranks.³²⁷ As indicated in Tables 5 and 6, East German membership was reported to have quickly surpassed that of the German co-operatives in 1932 in all of the states (*Länder*, see also map in section 11.1.) of the DDR:

Table 6: 1946 membership numbers:³²⁸

	31.12.32	31.3.46	30.4.46	31.5.46	30.6.46	31.7.46	31.8.46
Saxony	356,026	274,785	293,920	351,028	355,000	369,197	376,197
Saxony-Anhalt	122,832	48,829	133,121	164,421	191,475	217,658	235,761
Thuringia	175,179	81,597	138,680	151,011	156,770	168,755	174,481
Mecklenburg	36,351	27,567	36,568	42,604	45,130	49,737	54,594
Brandenburg	187,698	74,860	151,740	148,679	179,754	192,554	200,934
Berlin (Soviet Sector)	60,000	20,000	48,064	78,920	86,696	90,307	97,685
Soviet Zone	938,086	527,638	802,095	936,663	1,015,098	1,088,208	1,139,492

As of May 1947, the *Konsum*'s membership comprised forty percent workers, fifteen percent white-collar employees, three percent independent professionals, four percent farmers, five percent independent self-employed tradesmen and industrial workers, six percent pensioners, and twenty-nine percent housewives.³²⁹ As Table 6 indicates, the membership rose rapidly into the 1950s and 1960s, but eventually stabilized at around 4.5 million in the 1970s out of a population of around 17 million. The size of membership by and large remained intact for the final two decades of the DDR.

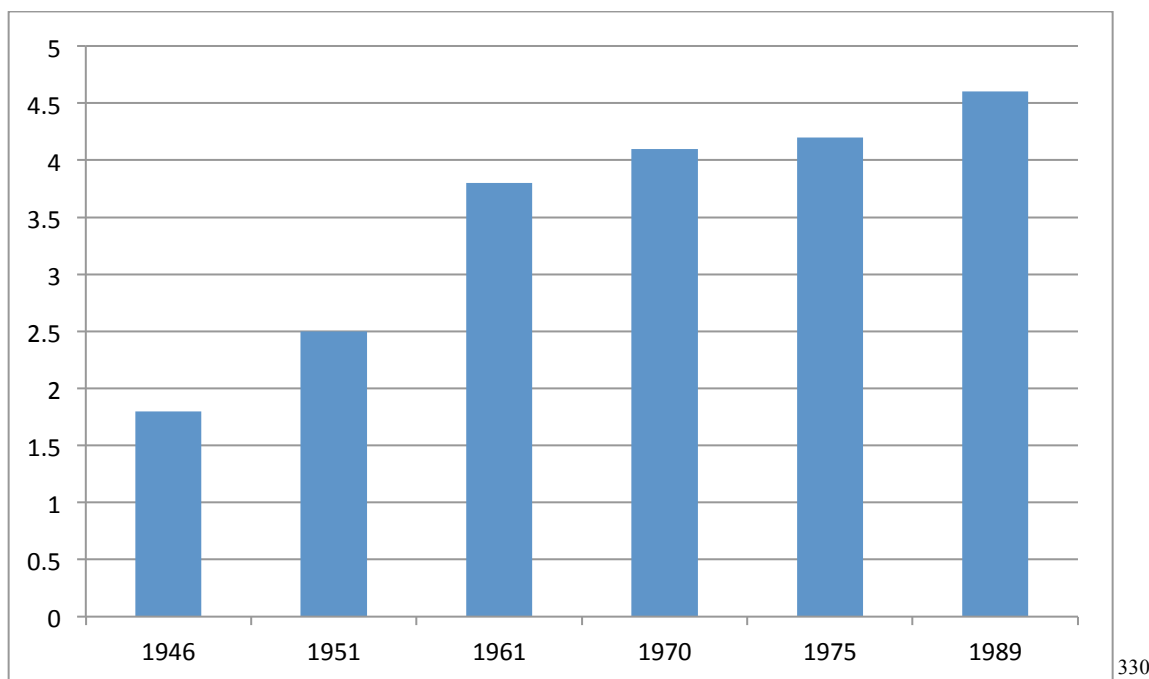
³²⁵ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 25.

³²⁶ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 26-29.

³²⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Auszug aus dem Bericht über den Verbandstag des Verbandes Thüringer Konsumgenossenschaften GmbH., Erfurt, am 31.5.1947, 45.

³²⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 19.

³²⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, am 31.5.1947, 45.

Table 7: The increasing membership of the *Konsum* measured in millions

According to the socio-economist Johnston Birchall, the numbers in Table 6 demonstrate extremely rapid growth for a co-operative. He maintains that, “under communist régimes, co-operative sectors grew until, on paper at least, they were the biggest in Europe.”³³¹ In his view,

We would be wrong to be impressed by such figures. In every country, communism meant the loss of the fundamental principles by which we define co-operatives: voluntary membership, independence, democracy, and return of economic results to members. Democratic centralisms prevailed: primary co-ops were controlled by their federal bodies, the federations by party members and government appointees, and co-operative business was conducted in a framework of imposed quotas and targets which left the members in charge of only the details of how to meet the state’s requirements.³³²

In this context, Birchall is only partially correct. In the DDR, East Germans were *not* forced to join the *Konsum*; rather, they became members for various reasons, which included gaining access to *Konsum* stores and the membership refund, maintaining the co-operative tradition, and

³³⁰ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, *The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic*, (Berlin: Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften, 1976), 51. See also Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 28.

³³¹ Birchall, *The international co-operative movement*: 118.

³³² Ibid.

participating in *Konsum* cultural activities. In this sense, the *Konsum* membership was based, contrary to Birchall's claim, on voluntary support for various individual, financial, consumerist, cultural, and political motivations. Of course, the *Konsum* was often the only retail or cultural option available in smaller centres, which brings into question the degree of voluntarism. There were, in other words, degrees of voluntarism based on the options available and the potential benefits one received for such participation. For instance, in a 2011 interview, an anonymous female interviewee indicated that she was not a member because *Konsum* membership did not translate into concrete political advantage, which was unlike membership in other DDR mass-organizations.³³³ In fact, as she points out, it was very difficult to realize educational and career ambitions without membership in the SED, FDJ, and the FDGB. In her words, "motivations for having membership in the *Konsum* were always a private matter."³³⁴ In another interview, Martin Bergner, a former *Konsum* economist, concurs when he states that "there was no political pressure to join the *Konsum* – motivation was based upon getting the patronage refund."³³⁵ It will be seen in the subsequent sections that the larger the population centre the lower the participation numbers in *Konsum* political and cultural meetings. This likely indicates that East Germans weighed their various options to determine what level of participation in a given mass-organization would reap the highest rewards. On the basis of this reasoning, in Leipzig, the DDR's second largest city, participation in the *Konsum* was low because it engendered less of the biographical credentials one needed for advancement in East German society in comparison with the other more prominent mass-organizations and the SED.

³³³ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Author's interview with Martin Bergner (former economist for the *Konsum* and current Spokesperson for the Zentralkonsum), Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

4.2. A mass-organization

The *Konsum* was a political organization that facilitated the state's effort to produce and promote a specific kind of knowledge, a linguistic discourse (see subsection 4.2.6 on *Konsum* publications), an appropriate use of free time, and East German state-narrative. The *Konsum*'s propaganda provided instruction in the virtues and the political discourse of socialism, as well as how to give and obey the orders of the ruling SED (see Chapter 6 on education). The *Konsum* inculcated discipline and encouraged the *Konsum*'s members, consumers, workers and employees (mostly women), youth, and rural residents in the SBZ/DDR to establish, promote, and maintain communist rule. Clearly – as internal party documents suggest – the SED (correctly) understood that the *Konsum* had ample opportunities to act as a political tool on account of its propinquity to millions of East Germans. It is for these reasons that I suggest the *Konsum* was a relatively effective mass-organization.

4.2.1. The subordination of the *Konsum* to the political objectives of the state

Archival documents written in the early postwar years indicate that the *Konsum* was rapidly becoming a political organization. A report, dated 13 August 1946, by Helmut Lehmann, a member of the Politburo, states:

The party perceived the *Konsum* as an antifascist mass-organization, which was obliged to aid the party in the realisation of socialist goals. For this reason, it was absolutely necessary for the consumer co-operatives to commit themselves to completing these political tasks and have a decisive influence in the socialist movement. The central secretariat and the SED have approved party work in the co-operatives. Our party members in the *Konsum* had to aid in the fulfillment of these tasks.³³⁶

This quotation indicates that Lehmann recognized or was at a minimum paying lip service to the notion of the *Konsum* as an antifascist mass-organization. In a speech from June 1947, Lehmann

³³⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. November 13, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED written by Helmut Lehmann, 22.

stated the following in regards to the relationship between the SED and the consumer co-operatives: “In the struggle against capitalism in the socialist state, the co-operative was to become a political functionary of the régime.”³³⁷

SED and *Konsum* functionaries were attempting to place the *Konsum* at the political disposal of the state. These functionaries requested the recognition of the *Konsum* as a mass-organization, with representation in the Antifascist-Block. In August 1947, Lehmann declined this request. He wrote to the co-operative state party executives in Berlin, Potsdam, Schwerin, Weimar, Dresden, and Halle suggesting that “we believed that this would not have been appropriate. [The specific reasons as to why Lehmann declined are not given in the document.] Nevertheless, we recommend that in special cases the *Konsum* may and will eventually be included in the Antifascist-Block.”³³⁸ This is important as it shows that the *Konsum* was not considered officially part of the governing structures of the DDR, although it seems as though its leadership was eager to subordinate the *Konsum* to the needs of the state. The *Konsum*, however, differed from other mass-organization because the FDJ (socialist mass youth organization), DFD (mass women’s organization), and the FDGB (trade union federation) had seats in the People’s Chamber (*Volkskammer*). But, as discussed in Appendix 11.2, the *Konsum* still had a strong voice within the *Volkskammer*, with at least three of its long-serving presidents as members.

The *Konsum* coordinated its political work with other mass-organizations, especially the FDJ and DFD. In his article *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*, historian Andreas Ludwig shows that by the spring of 1945, the first co-operatives began to engage with

³³⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Protokoll über die Konferenz der Konsum-Genossenschaftsverbände in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone in Schwerin/Meckl. Am Donnerstag, dem 5. Juni und Freitag, dem 6. Juni 1947, 32.

³³⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. 25. August, 1947, Zuziehung der Konsumgenossenschaften im Antifa-Block, written by H. Lehmann to the regional party executives in Berlin, Potsdam, Schwerin, Weimar, Dresden, Halle, 83.

mass-organizations such as the FDGB. In September 1945, the FDGB compelled its members to join the co-operatives; in turn, the FDGB was also represented in the co-operative executive branch.³³⁹ In fact, co-operatives were obligated to maintain a close working relationship with the FDGB; the FDGB reciprocated by encouraging its members to join the *Konsum*.³⁴⁰ During a conference held on 12 September 1947, Bernhard Göring, a representative of the FDGB, stressed, “although the consumer co-operatives were to remain politically neutral, they nevertheless had political duties to fulfill, namely leading in the struggle against fascism and for democracy.”³⁴¹ This quotation demonstrates that the *Konsum* – at least outwardly – fulfilled and incorporated the roles of an antifascist mass-organization.³⁴² Gerhard Lucht, the president of the VDK, further placed the *Konsum* at the disposal of various mass-organizations. In August 1959, he wrote:

Co-operative tasks can only be solved through the establishment of an extensive socialist relationship, and the development and support of diverse forms of socialist co-operative work through a collaborative relationship between the leadership of the local organs of state power, with the trade organs of all property forms, the committees of the National Front, the Agricultural Co-operatives, the mass-organizations like the Free German Trade Union Federation, Democratic Women’s League of Germany, and the Free German Youth.³⁴³

Documents from the Department of Trade and Provision indicate that the subordination of the *Konsum* to the ideological policies of the SED continued well into the late 1950s.³⁴⁴ One

³³⁹ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 14.

³⁴⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 22, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 7.

³⁴¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Wiederschrift über die am Donnerstag, dem 11.9. und Freitag, den 12.9.47 in Kühlungsborn/Meckl. stattgefundenen Beiratssitzung des Konsum-Hauptsekretariats der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und des sowjetischen Sektors der Stadt Berlin., 19.

³⁴² Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 25.

³⁴³ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. August 8, 1959 recommendations written by Gerhard Lucht, president of the VdK, entitled Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung, Durchführung und Auswertung des IV. Genossenschaftstages, 5.

³⁴⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 9.

such document from the department of Trade and Provision from 13 August 1958 states the following:

Co-operatives have been given the task of providing the population with their education in socialist principles in order for co-operators to make a significant contribution to the establishment of the socialist state power, and the formation of the political unity of our people. The co-operatives have placed themselves at the disposal of the workers' and farmers' state and the new means of production. As a mass-organization, they were committed to the development and consolidation of socialist consciousness amongst our citizens.³⁴⁵

Combined, these quotations indicate that at least outwardly the *Konsum* wanted the SED to recognize it as a mass-organization. Beyond that, however, it would be illusory to attempt to measure the sincerity of these statements. Nevertheless, the following sub-section gives some concrete examples of what the *Konsum* did as a mass-organization and presents some of the ways that members reacted to this.

4.2.2. Activities as a mass-organization and membership participation

One of the main roles of the *Konsum* was the organization of monthly membership meetings.³⁴⁶ Generally, *Konsum* members who wanted to become party candidates were required to attend such meetings and then demonstrate a basic understanding of the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism.³⁴⁷ The specific intention of these gatherings was to engender trust in the party. These meetings were designed to increase the qualifications of all members so that they would be better able to implement party resolutions in their daily lives.³⁴⁸ To this end, attendees (employees, members, and youth) had to discuss political and ideological questions with propagandists in order to deepen their understanding of the socialist and working-class

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁴⁶ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 3, Betriebs – Partei – Organisation – Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Köpenick, Friedrichshagen, 29.10.1953, 3.

³⁴⁷ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 1, Bericht für die Wahlversammlung der Betriebsparteiorganisation am 31. März 1959, 1-2.

³⁴⁸ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 5, Arbeitsentschließung der Betriebsparteiorganisation, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Pankow, 14.4.64, 1-2.

worldview, as well as celebrate and give importance to events such as the 40th Anniversary of the October Revolution in 1957.³⁴⁹ At political meetings, the *Konsum* functionaries explained to workers and members the fundamental political policies of the party. For instance, with the construction of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961, the *Konsum* was forced to explain the necessity of this construction as an “antifascist-protective-wall” and a measure necessary to preserve peace and protect the socialist state against the hostility of West-German agents and saboteurs. In order to clarify the threats from the West, the *Konsum* held a membership meeting entitled: *Why do the two German states confront each other as Enemies (Warum stehen sich die beiden deutschen Staaten feindlich gegenüber?)*³⁵⁰

The propaganda departments of the *Konsum*, moreover, helped speakers and propagandists prepare their addresses during these meetings. Propagandists offered seminars, speeches, lectures, and consultations to answer various questions about the socialist construction in East Germany.³⁵¹ These speakers were instructed to mobilize members politically and convince them that their criticisms were being addressed – thus, they were helping to improve co-operative work.³⁵² Generally, these propagandists ensured that various political discussions took place. Within the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick*, for instance, a number of functionaries were charged with ensuring that ideological work was carried out smoothly. As the secretary of the administration of this co-operative, Frau B. had to certify that there was a high level of political and ideological work in the form of high membership participation during these

³⁴⁹ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 1, Für unsere Betriebsparteiorganisation ergeben sich folgende Hauptaufgaben: I. Propaganda- und Agitationsarbeit, II. Gewerkschaftsarbeit, III. Jugendarbeit (Date not given), 1-2. See also SWA: U2/(SWA 530)I/108, Analyse über die massenpolitische Arbeit 1957, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, Politische Massenarbeit, den 12.12.1957, 2.

³⁵⁰ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 10, Politische Konzeption der Parteileitung zur Führung der Plandiskussion 1963, 2-3.

³⁵¹ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 1, Bericht für die Wahlversammlung der Betriebsparteiorganisation am 31. März 1959, 1-2.

³⁵² SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 7.

meetings. Furthermore, Herr H. was directly responsible for agitation and propaganda; he ensured that written and oral propaganda reflected the current and important political events of the day.³⁵³ In May 1961 in Leipzig, for instance, some of these political events included contemporary discussions about Gagarin's first space flight, the Franco-Algerian War (1954 to 1962), and the 15th Anniversary of the SED. There were also general discussions about contemporary global politics, which included members declaring their solidarity in support of Cuba in 1961.³⁵⁴ This evidence reflects how the *Konsum* propagandists were promulgating the SED's message and explicating international events within the wider discourse of the Communist Bloc. What is more, it testifies to the active involvement of the SED in the *Konsum*.

During a number of meetings, members also had the opportunity to converse, grumble, air grievances, and raise significant issues about the DDR's current economic and supply situations. For instance, at meetings of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Mitte*, members vented their complaints and frustrations about the *Konsum*'s distribution practices along with the poor quality and shortages of its consumer goods. Specifically, they grumbled about the inadequate supply of milk and the general unavailability of food products.³⁵⁵ In fact, when members did attend meetings, the primary motivation was likely to "blow off steam" and – as permitted by the powers above – to openly grumble. Renowned anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott would likely describe these meetings as something of a win-win situation for both the party elite and subordinate classes in the DDR, since the dominant actors allowed subordinates to express their anger in an environment that was controlled by the

³⁵³ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 10, Tätigkeitsmerkmale für die Verantwortung der einzelnen Pateileitungsmitglieder der KG Köpenick, 1.4.1968, 1-2.

³⁵⁴ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Bericht über die durchgeführten Mitglieder-Versammlungen 1961 der KG Leipzig Südwest, den 2.5.1961, 1.

³⁵⁵ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Einschätzung der durchgeführten Mitgliederversammlungen im Monat April, Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig Mitte, Leipzig, den 13.5.1961, 1.

powerful. By participating in these meetings, subordinates were accepting the status quo and working within the state-controlled, state-observed, and state-monitored channels of venting or grumbling without directly challenging the state. Nevertheless, Scott states, “The purpose of grumbling is often not simply self-expression, but the attempt to bring the pressure of discontent to bear on elites. If the message is too explicit, its bearers risk open retaliation; if it is too vague, it passes unnoticed altogether.”³⁵⁶ As will be shown in Chapter 8, East Germans became especially well versed in the art of grumbling and exerting pressure on the state, without directly and openly challenging the authority and legitimacy of SED-rule.

The *Konsum* measured the ideological impact of its agitation and propaganda by measuring attendance in membership meetings. While every member was encouraged to attend co-operative ideological meetings, attendance at them was generally low.³⁵⁷ In Herzberg (Brandenburg) in 1952, there was a reported participation rate of 59.2 percent in the membership meetings, which was an increase of around 22.8 percent from the previous year. Within other co-operatives, however, the membership participation rate was declining. The participation rate in Stendal (Saxony-Anhalt) was 42.5 percent in 1950 and dropped to 18 percent in 1952. In other centres at that time (1952), the participation rates were even worse with only 12.1 percent in Gardelegen (Saxony-Anhalt), 12.3 percent in Osterburg (Saxony-Anhalt), and a mere 6.1 percent in Berlin. To increase participation, the membership meetings were reduced in Gardelegen and Osterburg from two nights per week to one. More generally, the overall average participation rate dropped from 36 percent in 1951 to 27 percent in 1952. The author of the report titled *The Analysis and Results of the Representative Elections*, Rudi Blankenburger, was

³⁵⁶ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1985), 156.

³⁵⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. 30. December, 1946, für Gen. Lehmann Frage einer Zentralstelle für die Konsumgenossenschaften, 37.

worried about this participation since “the membership meetings were necessary for the *Konsum* to develop into an aggressive mass-organization.”³⁵⁸ There were a total of sixteen membership meetings at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Nord* in 1962 in which only eight percent of the members participated.³⁵⁹ There were multiple meetings held throughout the *Konsum*’s network in Leipzig which portray the meagre participation:

KG Mitte	7.4 percent
KG Südost	6.3 percent
KG Süd	7.0 percent
KG West	7.3 percent
KG West	7.3 percent
KG Nordost	9.0 percent
KG Nord	9.7 percent ³⁶⁰

The *Konsum* believed that this derisory and declining participation was based on inadequate preparations for the meetings, as well as this organization’s inability to gain the support of youth.³⁶¹ Nevertheless, these numbers demonstrate that the membership was largely uninterested in the *Konsum*’s portrayal of contemporary politics and ideology. When members did participate, they generally wanted to discuss the development of a retail trade network, the supply situation, and the amount of the patronage refund, rather than political and ideological concerns.³⁶² This was, I think, evidence of selective participation in a mass-organization on one’s own terms.

As a response to the dwindling turnout, the *Konsum* made various attempts to increase membership participation. For instance, in 1962, the *Konsum* tried to improve its collaboration with the party, DFD, and within the National Front to siphon members from these other mass-

³⁵⁸ Rudi Blankenburger, "AKB: Auswertung und Ergebnisse der Vertreterwahlen," in *Monatsschrift Grundsätzliche Fragen der Konsumgenossenschaften* (Berlin VDK, 1952), 4-8.

³⁵⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Analyse über die massenpolitische Arbeit im I.62, Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig Nord, 9.4.62.

³⁶⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Mitgliederversammlungen im Monat April, An den Konsumgenossenschaftsverband Bezirk Leipzig, 12.6.61.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 25.

organizations.³⁶³ Believing that promotional improvements would translate into increased attendance, the *Konsum* “prettied-up” (*verschönt*) its advertisements for meetings and cultural activities in shop window displays (see Illustration 7).³⁶⁴ At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Mitte* where the average attendance was around 7.5 percent, the co-operative’s agitators personally invited members to meetings; in addition, they tried to improve the cultural opportunities and the promotional advertisements.³⁶⁵



Illustration 7: A “prettied up” poster promoting the *Konsum* sponsored Cultural Ensemble and Variety Program in Plauen (Circa 1960s)³⁶⁶

Cultural activities also took place during these meetings.³⁶⁷ The official purpose of all this was to increase membership participation in antifascist culture.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, by making improvements to the content of these activities and creating an active cultural life, certain members of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Süd* believed this would translate into increased

³⁶³ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Einschätzung der durchgeführten Mitgliederversammlungen im Monat April, Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig Mitte, Leipzig, den 13.5.1961.

³⁶⁴ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Bericht über die durchgeführten Mitglieder-Versammlungen 1961 der KG Leipzig Südwest, den 2.5.1961, 3.

³⁶⁵ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, den 13.5.1961, 2.

³⁶⁶ SSC: 30878/1148/7, Plauen (Circa 1960s).

³⁶⁷ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Bericht über die durchgeführten Mitglieder-Versammlungen 1961 der KG Leipzig Südwest, den 2.5.1961, 1.

³⁶⁸ SWA: U2/(SWA 530)I/108, Analyse über die massenpolitische Arbeit 1957, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, Politische Massenarbeit, den 12.12.1957.

efficiency in the workplace.³⁶⁹ By 1962, at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Süd* all membership meetings included cultural performances such as people's art shows, slide shows, films, fashion shows, and performances by students from local theatre and music groups.³⁷⁰ Two interviewees stated that they enjoyed the cultural activities organized by the *Konsum*, especially the dances and musical performances.³⁷¹ The following images portray some these activities.



Illustration 8: *Konsum* variety show and cultural activity in front of the slogan “The support of cultural activities is an important task of the *Konsum*” (date and place not given – likely the 1950s in Saxony)³⁷²



Illustration 9: *Konsum* members enjoying *Konsum* sponsored cultural activities (date and place not given – likely the 1950s in Saxony)³⁷³

³⁶⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Betr. Ihr Schreiben v. 28.2.63 kulturelle Massenarbeit, Konsum-Genossenschaft Leipzig Süd, Der Vorstand, 14.3.63, 2.

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Author's interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.; Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

³⁷² SSC: 30878/1148/5, III/38 (date not given - likely the 1950s).



Illustration 10: A *Konsum* musical performance (date and place not given – likely the 1950s in Saxony)³⁷⁴

The *Konsum* ultimately dedicated a significant portion of its limited resources to funding meetings, assemblies, and cultural activities so as to fulfill its ideological and cultural obligations (for specific monetary figures see section 4.2.4). In January 1963, for instance, the administration of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* financially sponsored various activities including youth discussions (forty participants), a conference for store administrators (eighty participants), a women’s conference (eighty participants), and various educational courses (nearly five-hundred participants). In March 1963, further activities were planned, including membership meetings with hundreds of members and participants expected.³⁷⁵

The *Konsum*’s sponsorship of political meetings and cultural performances demonstrates some of the primary problems inherent in the entire system of East German socialism, namely putting the importance of political objectives before economic imperatives. In my view, this was evident whenever the *Konsum* “wasted” the working hours of its employees in political and ideological training and vast resources on the aforementioned politicized activities.

³⁷³ SSC: 30878/1148/7 II/10 (date and place not given – likely the 1950s in Saxony).

³⁷⁴ SSC: 30878/1148/7 II/31 (date and place not given – likely the 1950s in Saxony).

³⁷⁵ SWA: U2/SWA 2318, Einschätzung der massenpolitischen Arbeit der Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig – Süd im I. Quartal 1961, 1-2.

During these meetings and performances, the *Konsum* tried to convince and persuade the masses of the correctness (*Richtigkeit*) of the political course of the SED government and to mobilize them for the great challenges during the “building of socialism” and the struggle for a unified, independent, peace-loving, and democratic Germany. In other words, the *Konsum* had to help its customers and members develop an “aggressive spirit and to love and defend their homeland.”³⁷⁶ Additionally, this agitation was expected to convince the workers of the necessity to fulfill and over-fulfill economic plans. The SED and the *Konsum* believed that this agitation was an important instrument in the political and ideological education of its members and in explaining co-operative tasks and duties.³⁷⁷ In 1952, the *Konsum*’s propaganda department stated, “these systematic activities and the propaganda work in the consumer co-operatives will contribute to the development of the socialist consciousness of its 2.5 million members. By contributing to their ‘democratic’ education and ideological understanding, the consumer co-operatives had transformed themselves into an aggressive mass-organization.”³⁷⁸ Of course, this politicisation was likely, by and large, offset by low attendance.

The *Konsum*’s sponsored meetings and activities need not be interpreted as solely coercive. Many members may have used their membership in the *Konsum* to pursue their own career ambitions, interests, and hobbies during these events. This selective participation was often not politically relevant to the goals and objects of the SED’s brand of socialism. Historian Mary Fulbrook suggests:

Mass-organizations were not simply or always experienced as (merely) coercive, but were for many people at one time or another enabling, and experienced as a provider of entertainment and facilitator of holidays, hobbies and interest groups... But within this state-controlled organizational framework, large numbers of people were genuinely able to pursue certain leisure activities and follow their own interests, from fishing, singing

³⁷⁶ SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 3-4.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 12.

and bee-keeping to cacti collection, pottery and cooking, particularly when these were not obviously of immediate political relevance.³⁷⁹

A former *Konsum* saleswoman, for example, revealed in an anonymous interview how “these activities were simply fun and entertaining,” indicating that Fulbrook’s argument is accurate in her case.³⁸⁰

When asked if he considered the activities of the Union of the Consumer Co-operatives effective, Wolfgang Richter, a long-standing director of the consumer co-operative in *Kreis Eilenburg*, replied: “with what I know today and with my current attitude, my answer is *Jein* [yes/no or sort of]. The role of the consumer co-operatives as a mass-organization was largely deprecated. Co-operative politics were largely ignored, especially since the election of the *Volksvertretung* (Representative body of the people) had nothing to do with us.”³⁸¹ Similarly, historian Brett Fairbairn asserts, “on the one hand, the functionaries of the co-operatives were successful in their economic duties. Politically, however, they did little to help the party implement its political objectives.”³⁸² He further argues that the co-operatives often fell short of these ambitious political and ideological goals and their propaganda was often criticized for being too primitive; in general, the membership was more interested in attaining the patronage refund than in politics and ideology.³⁸³ The low attendance numbers at these meetings supports Fairbairn’s argument. A 2011 interview with Ulrich Fitzkow, a (East) German civil engineer, also echoes Fairbairn’s contention: Fitzkow was not even aware that the *Konsum* was a mass-organization. In his words, “I am not aware of any political role played by the *Konsum*. This

³⁷⁹ Fulbrook, *The People’s State*: 87-88.

³⁸⁰ Author’s interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.

³⁸¹ Jan Bösche, “7.1 Interview with Wolfgang Richter,” in *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90: Von der Plan- zur Marktwirtschaft am Beispiel der Genossenschaft Sachsen-Nord/Eilenburg* (Hamburg: Heinrich-Kaufmann-Stiftung des Zentralverbandes deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.V., 2007), 68.

³⁸² Fairbairn, “Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften,” 182.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 178-83.

organization did not have a political role; rather it was an economic institution.”³⁸⁴ In the case of Fitzkow, it is likely that as a male professional he would have gained little clout, aside from the patronage refund, through political participation in the *Konsum*. Another possibility is that perhaps people grew so accustomed to the constant propaganda that they did not perceive the *Konsum* as political. What is more likely, however, is that women, as the primary caretakers of the family, consumers, and participants in wage labour, recognized that there were some advantages to be gained through their participation in the *Konsum*. Not surprisingly, therefore, Fitzkow was, for a time, a member of the SED, while his wife was a member of the *Konsum*.³⁸⁵ Another possibility may be that Fitzkow’s statement reflects the de-politicization of East German society.

4.2.3. The *Konsum* as a women’s mass-organization

The *Konsum* attempted to recruit women to accrue female support for the SED-state. As a mass-organization, according to the guidelines of the SED for the re-establishment of the consumer co-operatives dated 24 August 1946, “the consumer co-operatives were a democratic organization and had to support the struggle of the antifascist parties against Nazism, militarism and imperialism, as well as contribute to the overcoming of Nazi ideology and to spread socialist ideas, especially to women.”³⁸⁶ The *Konsum* perceived and further expressed the image of woman as the “finance minister” of the family, responsible for daily consumption. For this reason, the *Konsum* directed its propaganda at women in an effort to recruit them as members. In an attempt to tap into female labour reserves, the *Konsum* also tried to convey to women that

³⁸⁴ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Civil Engineer and former SED party member, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 guidelines given to the newly formed co-operatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled Richtlinien der SPD und KPD für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften., 1.

they had ample work opportunities within this organization.³⁸⁷ The party clearly recognized the potential of the *Konsum* for this task.³⁸⁸ With a mass membership, the *Konsum* was – as the party rightly perceived – in a position to educate and integrate groups of the population that were outside of the party’s reach, especially women. Unlike the SED and the unions, the *Konsum* was primarily a women’s organization, almost something akin to the DFD but without the official status as such. In 1947, of its 147,000 functionaries and employees, eighty-three percent or 122,000 of whom were women.³⁸⁹ Co-operatives were to integrate women into the emerging socialist order in the Soviet Zone through various means of propaganda.³⁹⁰

In 1945/46, when there were still open and free elections in the SBZ, the KPD/SED made extensive efforts to encourage women to participate actively in politics. The re-established consumer co-operatives were among the few mechanisms available to the emerging régime to encourage women into making the transition into public life. On 13 November 1946, Lehmann gave the *Konsum* a new mandate. To translate his words, “the newly formed co-operatives had to ensure that women and housewives participated in public life, so that they were not confined to the narrow realms of their families. Rather, the *Konsum* was to encourage women to offer their services to the wider community.”³⁹¹

The *Konsum* urged women to use their free time in certain ways.³⁹² As a mass-organization, the *Konsum* sought to keep women active outside of the working day in the form of

³⁸⁷ SWA: U2/436, SED und Konsumgenossenschaften, SED Landesvorstand Gross-Berlin (Date not given), 3-4.

³⁸⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 19.

³⁸⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt Juli 1948, Juli 1948/Nr.1, 115.

³⁹⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 22, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 7.

³⁹¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. November 13, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED written by Helmut Lehmann, 22-23.

³⁹² Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 3.

political meetings and cultural activities. During these meetings, the *Konsum* recruited women to the party and translated the SED's message into easily accessible forms, although the messages being promulgated were not necessarily negative. In fact, the intention of this propaganda was to encourage women to think beyond the home and family and to consider higher education and training, as well as the possibility of assuming positions of leadership in the *Konsum* and the party.³⁹³ The *Konsum* also created women's committees through which women were to receive political and ideological education concerning the goals and primary objectives of the "workers' and farmers' state." In this way, the meetings and committees promoted the development of female propagandists and agitators.³⁹⁴

Even though the party used the *Konsum* to carry out its political objectives, women also used their participation in this organization to their advantage. It will become manifest in Part III that voluntarism in the *Konsum* was used as a tactic to foster good relations with *Konsum* employees and to acquire wanted consumer goods. To speculate further, participation may have allowed women to demonstrate that they were actively involved in party institutions and spending their free time in appropriate ways. This imperative to "take part" was almost certainly more pronounced in rural communities where choice and the limited options available were factors.

4.2.4. Mass-organization and youth

The *Konsum* actively supported and invested in youth. The aim of this investment was to mobilize and prepare young people to carry out party and government tasks, to meet the

³⁹³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 guidelines given to the newly formed co-operatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled Richtlinien der SPD und KPD für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften., 1.

³⁹⁴ SWA: V8/2059 Bd. 1, Frauenförderungsplan für das Jahr 1962 des KGV Bezirk Leipzig, 3.

challenges of fulfilling the five-year-plans, and to educate them in matters of socialism.³⁹⁵ Furthermore, the *Konsum* aimed to develop their class-consciousness and their ability to work as cadres and functionaries. Through daily work with youth, the *Konsum* sought to awaken in them a love of country and work.³⁹⁶

The *Konsum* used its network of schools to build up a reserve of educated, young adults.³⁹⁷ In Altenburg, the *Konsum* offered young residents wide ranging educational opportunities; for instance, there was a youth-oriented course on the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism. The Altenburg *Konsum* School also held practical courses on retail trade, restaurant management, and sales.³⁹⁸ Students were able to take language courses in Russian, French, English, Polish, and Czech.³⁹⁹ The regional administration of the *Konsum* was pleased that its network of schools continued to expand and that the general participation of young girls rose by 27.3 percent in 1961.⁴⁰⁰

The *Konsum*, furthermore, developed plans to invest in, interact with, and support youth.⁴⁰¹ The *Konsumgenossenschaft-Lichtenburg* in Berlin, for example, made direct financial investment in youth: 2,500DM for youth work; 300DM for education; 500DM for summer and winter vacations; 600DM for cultural events; 350DM for theatre and film visits; and 150DM for the creation of cultural groups.⁴⁰² At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick*, every party member was given a commission to work with two young employees in order to convince them

³⁹⁵ LAB: C Rep. 147-08 Nr. 28, Jugendförderungsplan der Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Lichtenberg, 1956, 1.

³⁹⁶ SWA: U2/(SWA 530)I/108, Maßnahmeplan zur Verbesserung der Arbeit mit der Jugend zur Festigung des ideologischen Bewusstseins, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, Leipzig, den 16.6.1958.

³⁹⁷ SWA: V8/2059 Bd. 1, Konzeption für die Berichterstattung vor der Revisionskommission des Bezirksverbandes am 16.10.1963, 1.

³⁹⁸ SWA: V8/2010, Lehrplan der BA der Gewerkschaft Handel, Nahrung und Genuß Altenburg vom 15.1.1961 - 30.6.1961, 1-4.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 7-8.

⁴⁰⁰ SWA: V8/2059 Bd. 1, Konzeption für die Berichterstattung vor der Revisionskommission des Bezirksverbandes am 16.10.1963, 3.

⁴⁰¹ SWA: U2/(SWA 530)I/108, den 16.6.1958.

⁴⁰² LAB: C Rep. 147-08 Nr. 28, 1956.

to become candidates of the party.⁴⁰³ The administration of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig-Südwest* considered the political and educational development of youth as one of its most important responsibilities. This was accomplished by training young people for administrative positions and through *Konsum*-sponsored youth hiking trips and visits to the theatre and cinema.⁴⁰⁴ The *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Pankow* utilized the monthly youth meetings to teach young members to trust the fundamentals of Marxist-Leninism; the party leadership supported this strategy within this co-operative. The *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Pankow* also held meetings to discuss contemporary political and economic questions in support of the youth club – *Der Klub junger Neuerer*.⁴⁰⁵

The *Konsum* opened retail outlets for youth and youth clubs for which its young workers were responsible – all of this was done with the assistance of the FDJ.⁴⁰⁶ With their combined financial support, the *Konsum* and the FDJ built 191 facilities with a capacity of 14,200 spaces. By controlling the election of suitable young candidates to run these facilities, these projects were designed to spread state influence to young people. With the construction of the youth club installations in the countryside, the *Konsum* and the SED believed that the needs of the youth were being met by virtue of intellectually stimulating entertainment and cultural activities.⁴⁰⁷ Furthermore, as cultural centres, the *Konsum* restaurants were required to hold various social events, which were meant to be popular with youth. In short, these rural cultural centres had a

⁴⁰³ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 4, Jugendarbeit, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin Köpenick, den 19.11.1957.

⁴⁰⁴ SWA: U2/SWA 2625, Jugendförderungsplan 1962, Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig Südwest, den 13.4.1962, 1-3.

⁴⁰⁵ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 6, Rechenschaftsbericht der Betriebsparteiorganisation der Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Pankow für die Wahlberichtsversammlung am 14.11.1966, 20.

⁴⁰⁶ SWA: U2/SWA 2625, Jugendförderungsplan 1962, Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig Südwest, den 13.4.1962, 1-3.

⁴⁰⁷ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS - HA XVIII Nr. 21047, Beschlußvorschlag zur Information und Maßnahmen zur termingerechten Fertigstellung der bis 1990 mit Kapazitäten der Landwirtschaft sowie mit Unterstützung der VdgB und des Verbandes der Konsumgenossenschaften planmäßig in den Dörfern zu schafenden Jugendklubeinrichtungen, Berlin, den 31.07.1987, 124-27.

direct influence not only on young East Germans, but also on the general population, garnering their support for the wide societal changes that were to take place in the countryside.⁴⁰⁸

4.2.5. The *Konsum*'s role as a mass-organization in the countryside (rural restaurants)

Rural inhabitants of the SBZ/DDR had long-standing religious traditions and regional peculiarities that did not coincide with the SED's modernist ideology and socialist transformations. The SBZ was comprised of a large amount of rural territory, with almost a third of the population living in communities of 2,000 residents or less. The SED soon recognized the difficulty of reaching and providing these communities with cultural entertainment in ways that corresponded to the modernist ideal of socialism. Subsequently, the SED became particularly concerned about lingering nationalist and racist traditions in the countryside.⁴⁰⁹ To this end, the party used the *Konsum* to implement its designs for social and cultural transformations, namely creating new party-approved social and cultural infrastructure in the countryside.⁴¹⁰ With millions engaged at some capacity in these events, the SED had a degree of success in establishing a new cultural language and new traditions of socialism in rural communities.

Traditionally, the *Gasthaus* (inn with a restaurant) played a central role in rural life as a meeting point of the cultural life of the town or village. However, according to the document the *Consumer Co-operatives in the German Democratic Republic* (published by the *Konsum* in the late 1960s), the role of the *Gasthaus* was not always positive in this regard, as it was typically more of a *Dorf-Kneipe* (village-pub).⁴¹¹ In the view of the SED, the establishment of *Konsum-Gaststätten* and state sponsored cultural activities had to neutralize and negate the manifestations

⁴⁰⁸ Ernst Menzel, "AKB: Zur Entwicklung der konsumgenossenschaftlichen Landgaststätten," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 157-58.

⁴⁰⁹ Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-90* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26-31.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴¹¹ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s).

of backwardness, such as the town pub, that lingered from the capitalist epoch in the countryside.⁴¹² For this reason, the *Konsum* began to bring a new *Gaststättenkultur* (restaurant and leisure culture) to the countryside. In other words, the *Konsum* – as the party and VDK intended – became a focal point of political, ideological, leisure, and cultural activities in the countryside. Through *Konsum* leisure activities, the party presented itself and its achievements to the rural population of the DDR. More importantly for the SED, the *Konsum* served as a central reference point of social and cultural communication; that is, (like all mass-organizations) it acted as a “transmission-belt” of cultural codes, party ideology, and the symbolism of socialism to individuals in rural communities. The SED and the *Konsum* believed that the socialist transformation of the countryside was one of the most difficult tasks faced by the party during the revolutionary transition from capitalism to socialism. During this process, the rural consumer co-operatives were like a base of operations for the working-classes in the countryside, where the *Konsum* created a wide network of restaurants intended to be centres for social, political, and cultural life.⁴¹³

In *Bezirk* Leipzig in 1957 (see map in section 11.1.), the *Konsum* took over thirty-six restaurants, thereby increasing the number to 104, with an increased turnover of approximately ten million Marks. For many *Konsum* functionaries, the operation of a restaurant was an entirely new undertaking; nevertheless, they continued to expand and improve the network in order to transform these restaurants into cultural meeting points for each and every town and village in the DDR.⁴¹⁴ In 1959, there were 4,000 *Konsum* restaurants, which served as cultural centres

⁴¹² Menzel, "AKB: Zur Entwicklung der konsumgenossenschaftlichen Landgaststätten," 155.

⁴¹³ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, Die nächsten Aufgaben der Konsum-Genossenschaften des Bezirkes Leipzig im 2. Fünfjahrplan, 11-12.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

where lectures were given, films shown, and parties celebrated.⁴¹⁵ The SED wanted the *Konsum* retail outlet and restaurant to be the only possibility for cultural consumption in rural locales. That way, the party could control which products were consumed along with the message of consumption, while observing the behaviour of the restaurant patrons. In other words, the rural restaurant was – as the SED wanted and intended – becoming the sole cultural meeting point of the new socialist town.⁴¹⁶

The party stressed that co-operative cultural work and activities were significantly important. For that reason, the SED continually demanded that the co-operative network be strengthened both politically and economically in order to influence cultural life in the smaller centres of the DDR.⁴¹⁷ These co-operative restaurants sponsored various cultural activities in which elements of the new socialist lifestyle were apparent.⁴¹⁸ Thus, one could find a number of state-sponsored activities that were – as the interviews conducted for this dissertation suggest – genuinely popular with rural residents. For instance, they offered a range of cultural activities, including fashion shows, film screenings, and town parties.⁴¹⁹ Customers, according to historian Manfred Kirsch, praised co-operative cultural groups (choirs, amateur plays, dance groups), as well as child-oriented activities (kindergarten and fashion shows).⁴²⁰

Fitzkow stated in an interview “the consumer co-operatives were a significant meeting place (*Treffpunkt*) in the countryside for rural inhabitants.”⁴²¹ In fact, all of the interviewees

⁴¹⁵ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 94-97.

⁴¹⁶ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, Die nächsten Aufgaben der Konsum-Genossenschaften des Bezirkes Leipzig im 2. Fünfjahrplan, 48.

⁴¹⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 4.

⁴¹⁸ Menzel, "AKB: Zur Entwicklung der konsumgenossenschaftlichen Landgaststätten," 155.

⁴¹⁹ "SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s)," 12.

⁴²⁰ Manfred Kirsch, "Güstrow -- eine Konsumgenossenschaft in der Praxis," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR* ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar Böhlau, 2006), 90.

⁴²¹ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, 18 April 2011.

mentioned that they had, at one time or another, eaten in *Konsum* restaurants – an experience which they all genuinely seemed to enjoy. According to Kirsch, the entire family ate there, especially farmers during the harvest. He also posits that co-operative members enjoyed their time there as most of these *Konsum* restaurants were equipped with a hall in which various events took place, such as harvest festivals and other cultural and sporting experiences.⁴²² In perhaps an over idealized tone Kirsch states, “the consumer co-operative restaurant became a neighbourly destination in which one could enjoy a Lübzer Pils following the working day.”⁴²³

It is, however, difficult to estimate and measure the ideological and social impact of the cultural centres on East Germans.⁴²⁴ What is certain was the intention of the SED to use *Konsum* bars and restaurants as conduits for direct contact with citizens of the DDR.⁴²⁵ Simply put, East Germans could not avoid the *Konsum*’s ubiquitous 6,300 restaurants, the majority of which were located in the countryside.⁴²⁶ During the co-operative meetings in the countryside, the VDK, as previously mentioned, normally recorded the participation rate of thirty to forty percent of the membership and the workers; moreover, the sales committees particularly bound the membership to the *Konsum*. In the cities, however, the participation of the membership was significantly worse (see membership numbers from Leipzig in section 4.2.2).⁴²⁷

⁴²² Kirsch, "Güstrow -- eine Konsumgenossenschaft in der Praxis," 107.

⁴²³ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 59.

⁴²⁴ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, EntschlieÙung der 6. Genossenschaftsratstagung des KGV Bezirk Leipzig, Leipzig, am 28. Februar 1958.

⁴²⁵ Ludwig, "Vom Dorfkonsum zum >>Komplexen System der Landversorgung<<," 51.

⁴²⁶ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 168.

⁴²⁷ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 27.



Illustration 11: Konsumgaststätte Sarmstorf near Güstrow, 1960⁴²⁸

According to Dr. W. Köppert's *Konsum* publication of 1958 titled *The Profitability of Rural Consumer Co-operatives*, "the consumer co-operatives in East Germany had diverse propaganda opportunities with which to help the working-class during the difficult transformation from capitalism by supporting the rule of the SED. In this situation, the *Konsum* had a particular advantage because of their status as a political mass-organization."⁴²⁹ In recognizing the political potential of the rural consumer co-operatives, Köppert stated:

By the Third Co-operative Congress held in 1955, sixty percent of all rural and agricultural families were members of the consumer co-operatives. One, therefore, can clearly recognize the enormous potential co-operatives held over this segment of the population. The co-operatives functioned as an educational tool for the rural membership. The co-operatives were authentic schools of democracy and of socialism, which will train cadres to become leading functionaries in co-operative industries. These functionaries will, then, be leaders and at the forefront of the socialist transformation of agriculture.⁴³⁰

The VDK helped the party transform the countryside by creating new cultural spaces in the form of a network of co-operative restaurants.⁴³¹ The aim of this cultural work was to spread

⁴²⁸ Kirsch, "Güstrow -- eine Konsumgenossenschaft in der Praxis," 106.

⁴²⁹ Dr. W. Köppert, "Dorf-Konsumgenossenschaften und Rentabilität," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 15-17.

⁴³⁰ Ibid.

⁴³¹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 11.

collectivist and socialist thought, as well as to create new cultural symbols in an area of Germany that the Soviets perceived as a former hotbed of German militarism.⁴³² Historian Eric Hobsbawm might describe what occurred in the DDR countryside as “inventing traditions” (i.e., the creation of state holidays, ceremonies, heroes, or symbols), which – unlike spontaneous generation – have specific political and social functions and would never come into existence if not through state pressure.⁴³³ To put it another way, this was an attempt at totalitarian social engineering with three overlapping characteristics: a) the establishment of symbols to create social cohesion among included membership groups and the exclusion of the unwanted so as to create real or imagined communities, b) the establishment and legitimatization of institutions and systems of hierarchy and authority, and c) the establishment of systems of beliefs, value systems, and codes of proper behaviour.⁴³⁴

4.2.6. *Konsum* publications (the link between party and consumer)

On 20 August 1948, the *Konsum* requested a licence from the SMAD to publish its own newspapers for members and functionaries. In its request to the SMAD, the *Konsum* indicated that this newspaper would be a connecting link between functionaries and members. The format of the initial paper was about eight pages. Every month 5,000 copies were to be published. The intent of publishing so many copies was to ensure that every member and functionary would have a copy in hand. The typical context of the newspaper read as follows:

1. Articles about the responsibilities and goals of the *Konsum*, as well as the political importance of the consumer co-operative movement.
2. Publications of the guidelines for the recruitment of *Konsum* functionaries and reports about the work in the co-operative schools.

⁴³² Erwin Rohde, "Das Programm des Bezirksverbandes Frankfurt (Oder) für die Arbeit auf dem Lande," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 84.

⁴³³ E.J. Hobsbawm, "Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 307.

⁴³⁴ E.J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E.J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 9.

3. Reports about individual co-operatives and their contributions to supply.
4. Publications dealing with specialist education and training of the sales personnel, as well as information for trainees in advertisement, window display, decoration, and the graphic design of posters.
5. The dissemination of co-operative news from all over the world.⁴³⁵

In August 1948, the SMAD gave the *Konsum* a licence to publish the monthly *Konsumgenossenschaftlichen Mitteilungen* to educate, mobilize, inform, and politicize its members and functionaries.⁴³⁶ From that point on, the consumer co-operatives published a number of newspapers in which advice for the Marxist notion of the “use value of commodities” could be found.⁴³⁷ Ultimately, according to Holland, the SED-controlled VDK had final authority over co-operative publications and the dissemination of the *Konsum*’s monthly publications.⁴³⁸

The consumer co-operatives developed a number of other publications: *Konsumgenossenschaftler*, *Konsumgenossenschaftliche Mitteilungsblatt*, *die Konsumverkaufsstelle*, and *die Handelswoche*.⁴³⁹ Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the *Konsum* began to increase the circulation of its co-operative publications; the objective behind this expansion was to increase the development of antifascist life in the membership organizations and enhance the political and economic work of the consumer co-operatives.⁴⁴⁰ The *Konsum* publications continued to deal with education and instructions for members and functionaries within the *Verkaufsstellenausschüsse* (consumer committees). During this time, the press devoted a great

⁴³⁵ LAB: C Rep. 120 Nr. 3192, Verband Berliner Konsumgenossenschaften, An die Sowjetische Zentralkommandantur Berlin über den Magistrat von Gross-Berlin für Volksbildung Referat Verlage, Betrifft: Antrag auf Erteilung einer Lizenz, 20.8.48.

⁴³⁶ LAB: C Rep. 120 Nr. 3192, Verband Berliner Konsumgenossenschaften (Konsumgenossenschaftliche Mitteilungen), Berlin, den 23. August 1948.

⁴³⁷ Katherine Pence, "Schaufenster des sozialistischen Konsums: Texte der ostdeutschen „consumer culture“,“ in *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte: Erkundungen zu Herrschaft und Alltag*, ed. Peter Becker and Alf Lüdtke (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), 98.

⁴³⁸ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 20.

⁴³⁹ Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 7.

⁴⁴⁰ SWA: U2/618, Geschäftsbericht des Vorstands des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften für das Jahr 1956, Beschlossen auf der 8. Tagung des Genossenschaftsrates des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 29.

deal of its resources to the monthly *Blick vorwärts* (look forward), which dealt with the fundamental principles and challenges facing the *Konsum*. The weekly newspaper, *Konsum-Genossenschafter*, (consumer co-operator) appeared in over 130,000 copies, and described the tasks and objectives of the *Konsum*; it also gave practical advice and instructions for the daily operations of retail outlets. Over half of the published contributions came from its readers, among them members, honorary functionaries, and employees from the retail outlets. In another way, this newspaper acted as a forum to coordinate the efforts and energies of every branch of the *Konsum* to carry out successful co-operative work.⁴⁴¹

During the SBZ and the initial decades of the DDR, the *Konsum* produced these publications to shore up its political responsibilities as a mass-organization and to “re-educate” the German people by creating a new socialist mentality (*Denkweise*) among women, members, workers, and functionaries.⁴⁴² Specifically, the content of the newspaper supported the *Konsum*’s role as a mass-organization by including the following themes and objectives: a) deepen co-operative thought amongst members and functionaries; b) demonstrate the connection between politics and economics; c) discuss SED orders given to the *Konsum*; d) explain statistical material about the development of the *Konsum* in the SBZ and the British, American, and French occupied zones of Germany; e) educate through articles about commercial business; and f) serve as an educational paper (*Schulungsblatt*) and as a contemporary news source (*Mitteilungsblatt*).⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹ "SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s)," 33.

⁴⁴² "LAB: C Rep. 120 Nr. 832, Begründung zur Herausgabe eine „konsumgenossenschaftlichen Mitteilungsblattes“,“ 1.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 2-3.



Illustration 12: A selection of the various *Konsum* publications⁴⁴⁴

Konsum newspapers not only produced articles about individual employees (especially women), but also featured the ways in which their work and contributions furthered the socialist project and state narrative. For instance, a report about a female member from the co-operative newspaper *Konsum-Verkaufsstelle* dated 1 February 1958 is couched in political and ideological language. It deals with the work of Gertrud Mundstock, a co-operative worker and member, who describes her efforts to convince other co-operative members about the correctness of the “party of the working-class” and the “government of the “workers’ and peasants’ state.” Moreover, the report gives her credit for supporting and organising the combined ideological efforts of the co-operatives with the DFD and the committees of the National Front. The report concludes with the following: “her active work in the consumer co-operatives and the other societal organizations is highly valued, because she is a mother of five.” This quote is revealing in that it is encouraging women to be both mothers and active members of society. This ‘double burden’ was the expectation for women to be responsible for housework and participate in wage labour.⁴⁴⁵ Similarly, the *Konsum* newspaper *Handelswoche* wrote a report about Thea Bellstedt

⁴⁴⁴ SWA: U2/618, Geschäftsbericht des Vorstands des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften für das Jahr 1956, Beschlossen auf der 8. Tagung des Genossenschaftsrates des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 31.

⁴⁴⁵ AKB: *Konsum-Verkaufsstelle* Nr. 3, 18 January 1958, 5.

in July 1959. Bellstedt, as the newspaper article describes her, was a hard worker, who always had time for a friendly word with her customers. Then the article becomes increasingly political by promoting her ideological contributions and notes that she founded the first workers' brigade at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Mühlhausen* the previous year and was an active member of the FDJ.⁴⁴⁶

The *Konsum* publications categorized women and explicated women's roles in East German society. These categories included housewives, consumers, working mothers and so on. However, beginning in the late 1950s, the state became less tolerant of housewifery as a legitimate occupation and there was increased pressure on women to achieve the ideal: the fully employed mother. In 1965, there was an actual shift in the Family Law declaring housewifery as "backward consciousness."⁴⁴⁷ Yet, because they were not integrated into the mainstream world of work and politics and by extension the ideal promoted by East German discourse, the issue of unemployed housewives was a problematic and persistent category. Hence, the *Konsum*, along with the DFD, appealed particularly to these women in their capacity as consumers, but also tried to integrate unemployed women into the workforce by giving them auxiliary jobs. By including women in the *Konsum* as factory workers, members, consumers, and sales personnel, the *Konsum* helped form the categories through which women were able to participate in East German socialism. These categorizations permeated all aspects of *Konsum* publications, and the political discourse it constructed became the blueprints for female identity and participation in East Germany. In a sense, the East German woman was the product or subject of these ideological manifestations, yet also the manipulator of them in ways, which were separate from

⁴⁴⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/2.029/86, Handelswoche, Juli 1959, Ein Mensch wie du und ich, 220.

⁴⁴⁷ Elizabeth Heineman, "Single Motherhood and Maternal Employment in Divided Germany: Ideology, Policy, and Social Pressures in the 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 3 (2000): 161.

the interests of their producer – the SED and the *Konsum*.⁴⁴⁸ This role of integrating women into the socialist project remained largely intact and signifies the more static nature and stolid role of the *Konsum*.

In 1970, the *Konsum* started an advertising newspaper to educate the public about new commodities. The paper was delivered four times throughout the course of the year to every membership household. It was a delicate process for the publishers to direct the attention of consumers to goods that were scarcely available, while simultaneously drawing their attention to the political themes of the day. For instance, *Konsum* advertising of the H 55 TK (a cupboard) depicted this item as essential for the modern household, but customers were angered by having to wait a year or more for the H 55 TK. This advertising also had to attune readers to the current political situation. For instance, in 1970 the newspaper commemorated the 100th anniversary of Lenin's birth. That year, *Konsum* advertisers and publishers were, for the most part, unable to print a piece of paper without it paying homage to Lenin.⁴⁴⁹

Furthermore, DDR advertising was not designed to increase profit for certain goods; rather it was meant to inform and educate the population about new products on the market and political events, slogans, anniversaries, and, of course, the antifascist narrative. More generally, the *Konsum* publications indicate that the line between advertising and political propaganda was blurred and murky. Generally, this advertising/propaganda promoted the régime and the socialist way of life rather than the *Konsum* and the wares it produced. More importantly, however, these publications were used to regulate demand through “rhetorical misdirection” or to draw the attention of consumers away from scarce goods to surplus products.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁸ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*: xii.

⁴⁴⁹ Helga Wagner, *Bino, Fit und Arthur der Engel: Werbung in der DDR* (Kassel: Wartberg, 2010), 33.

⁴⁵⁰ Pamela E. Swett, S. Jonathan Wiesen, and Jonathan R. Zatin, *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 15.

Once the *Konsum* became a member of the International Co-operative Alliance in 1971, it began to export its publications overseas, which were printed in the language of the targeted country. With access to these publications, the international co-operative public was informed of developments in the *Konsum* and the DDR vis-à-vis the “Magazine of the Consumers’ Co-operatives of the DDR” and similar periodicals which were designed for foreign readers in all parts of the world.⁴⁵¹

Konsum publications promoted the plans, industries, functionaries, members, and achievements of the *Konsum*. Of course, all of this was more broadly contextualized to fit within the broader antifascist state narrative by drawing attention to the ways in which the *Konsum* industries and employees were realizing the SED’s economic and political objectives.⁴⁵² Furthermore, *Konsum* publications demonstrate the difference between official representation (what James C. Scott would describe as part of the public transcript) and private communications (the hidden transcript). As archival sources, there are clear reasons to trust and mistrust these publications. The VDK published them as a means of instruction, indoctrination, and propaganda. Hence, these publications need to be carefully interpreted as they were neither completely trustworthy nor objective; these documents, nevertheless, say a great deal about the political discourse and the language used in East Germany, as well as what the state expected from its citizenry. Ultimately, *Konsum* publications are a useful tool to learn about what I pejoratively describe as East German language or *DDR Deutsch*.

⁴⁵¹ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic, 106.

⁴⁵² SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8997, Führungskonzeption des Vorstandes des VDK zur Lösung der Aufgaben in Jahren 1989 und 1990 zur Vorbereitung des XII. Parteitages der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Berlin Februar 1989, 202.

4.3. Conclusions

During the years of the Soviet occupation between 1945 and 1949, on top of their economic function of supplying the population, the SED assigned the cooperatives with the task of politically educating their members, thereby transforming the *Konsum* into a mass-organization.⁴⁵³ And so to answer the question raised at the beginning of this chapter, the Union of the Consumer Co-operatives of the DDR was both an effective and ineffective mass-organization. As a communication system, the *Konsum* – with its extensive network of retail outlets and publications – established direct and unremitting contact with its primary target groups and was able to attempt to infuse ideology into their daily experiences and leisure activities. It must be remembered that the *Konsum* was the second largest mass-organization in East Germany, with 4.1 million members in 1971 and 4.6 million in 1987.⁴⁵⁴ Unlike other SED controlled mass-organizations, such as the Free German Youth with an allocation of fifty representatives and the Democratic Women's League of Germany with an allocation of thirty-five representatives, co-operatives were neither officially represented in the People's Chamber (*Volkskammer*), nor was there a fixed number of *Konsum* representatives in the Central Committee and the SED controlled Politburo. But due to high *Konsum* membership numbers and unremitting contact with specific segments of the East German population targeted by the SED, this organization was a relatively effective instrument for spreading ideology, as well as a useful propaganda tool and mobilizing force for the state. Evidently, its impact on individuals is exceedingly difficult to measure. I therefore base my conclusions on the sheer size of the organization and its massive network of members, sales outlets, workers and functionaries, its

⁴⁵³ Kurzer, "War der Konsum etwas Besonderes für die Ostdeutschen?," 127.

⁴⁵⁴ The list points out that the Confederation of Free German Trade Union had a membership of 7.2 million in 1971, which increased to 9.5 million in 1987. The Women's Democratic League had a membership of 1.5 million in 1987. Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR., Panorama DDR (Film), and Intertext Fremdsprachendienst der DDR., *Information GDR*: 267.

close proximity to women, youth, and rural residents and the statements made by those interviewed for this dissertation. Furthermore, the SED and the *Konsum* controlled cultural activities in the countryside and encouraged East Germans to spend their leisure time doing certain “party-approved” activities in certain “party-approved” ways. Therefore, these activities became a totalitarian incursion into their daily lives. Accordingly, I believe that historian Jan Bösche is correct when he argues that the SED valued the political role that the consumer co-operatives played with their mass membership because they were well-positioned to conduct ideological work, namely convincing the population that “the party is always right.”⁴⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Fulbrook is also correct when she states, “only a minority of members swallowed the ‘political-ideological slogans’ of the respective organizations at face value.”⁴⁵⁶ In fact, participation in the *Konsum*’s political meetings and cultural activities may have been nothing more than individuals pursuing their own leisure interests and attempting to verify in their personal biographies that they were participating and volunteering in the appropriate recreational activities, though they may have had to regurgitate a few ideological slogans in order to do so. Perhaps for this reason the SED valued the consumer co-operatives because they *appeared* to members to be semi-autonomous from the régime. Of course, the role of a mass-organization was to serve as messenger or “transmission-belt” and persuade the masses of the correctness of the ruling party and its ideology. In the context of this chapter, it has been shown that a number of societal groups each with their own motivations converged in the *Konsum* (junction) in the form of people participating to pursue leisure activities as opposed to being subject to ideological persuasion. The ensuing chapter will explore how the *Konsum* carried out a similar role of a propagandistic “transmission-belt” internationally.

⁴⁵⁵ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 25.

⁴⁵⁶ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 87.

5. International role of the *Konsum*

The *Konsum* encourages friendly relations with the West German co-operatives and supports co-operators from both German states in their struggle for peace, democracy, and social progress.

- From the statutes of the *Konsum* (date not given)⁴⁵⁷



Illustration 13: A.P. Klimov (rt.), President of Centrosoyus, the Russian state-owned co-operative organization, and Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Association of Consumers' Co-operatives in 1975
The original caption from this document reads: "an agreement signed between two fraternally allied co-op organizations on continued scientific and technological co-operation and intensification of socialist economic integration is sealed with a cordial handshake between."⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁷ SSC: 3078/1077/1, Konsumgenossenschaft Statut (date not given), 5.

⁴⁵⁸ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic, 88.

The history of modern Germany has been strongly influenced and at times even determined by the course of international events. The same is true for the history of German co-operatives, which were caught up in the division of the two Germanies, the Cold War, and a complicated web of German-German relations that existed both in periods of tension and détente. It was against this backdrop that the *Konsum* waged its struggle against the alleged evils of imperialism, neo-colonialism, and racism. Moreover, this chapter shows that the *Konsum* attempted to persuade its citizens, West Germans, and national co-operative organizations of the justness of the DDR and the Soviet Union's foreign policy.⁴⁵⁹ In these respects, *Konsum* foreign policy clearly reflected the SED links with Soviet bloc countries. VDK President Heinz Fahrenkrog further explicated *Konsum* support of SED foreign policy in a 1975 publication commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the East German consumer co-operatives:

Results and experience underpin the lesson history has taught us, namely that friendship with the Soviet Union and other countries of the community of socialist states is the foundation of the all-round and continuous development of the DDR, of ensuring its independence and of creating the most favourable conditions for its peaceful construction. The DDR is an integral part of the community of socialist states and it maintains fraternal links with its friends through bilateral and multilateral contracts in political, economic, technical, intellectual, cultural and other spheres. And so do the consumers' co-operatives. Strong bonds of friendship and fraternal co-operation exist between the co-operative organizations of the socialist countries. Close relations which are continually intensifying have existed with all co-operative organizations of the European socialist CMEA countries for many years now.⁴⁶⁰

5.1. The *Konsum* and the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA)

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) was founded in London in August 1895. This first forum of the ICA was attended by co-operative organizations from Belgium, Denmark, France, Holland, Italy, Russia, Serbia, Great Britain, Australia, India, Argentina, and the United States. The ICA – at least initially – saw itself as an organization that was determined to help the

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 87.

working classes.⁴⁶¹ At the 1896 Congress, the ICA took a strong stand on religious and political neutrality as indicated by the following statement:

The Alliance does not concern itself with either politics or religion. Co-operation is a neutral ground on which people holding the most varied opinion and professing the most diverse needs may meet and act in common. In order to maintain this neutrality, on which the unity of co-operative movement depends, every person and association in membership of the Alliance recognizes that co-operation is self-sufficient and must not serve as the instrument of any party.⁴⁶²

During the Cold War, these ideas influenced the ways in which the ICA perceived co-operation in Eastern Bloc/communist countries, especially the idea that co-operation was voluntary and free of state intervention.⁴⁶³

The *Konsum* tried to join the ICA on several occasions. A memorandum written by the *Verband-Berliner-Konsumgenossenschaften* to the ICA on 1 January 1947 indicates that the functionaries and members of the Berlin *Konsum* were very pleased that delegates from the ICA had come to Berlin to inspect the conditions for the reconstruction of the consumer co-operatives that were destroyed by the Nazi régime. This memorandum also pointed out that the *Konsum* was prepared to implement the ICA's instructions, provide all requested information and documents, and permit ICA inspection of already reconstructed co-operative installations.⁴⁶⁴

The closing paragraph of the memorandum states:

We hoped that all the co-operatives in all of Germany can be unified into a single association and that the German co-operatives can once again be accepted into the ICA. We have done everything within our power to exterminate Nazi ideology, overcome the spirit of militarism, and, with all of our democratic resources, help with the reconstruction of a new Germany, thereby ensuring that there is world peace.⁴⁶⁵

⁴⁶¹ Rita Rhodes, *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace* (Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance, 1995), 21-24.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/113, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Verband Berliner Konsumgenossenschaften G.m.b.H., Berlin, den 27.1.47, Memorandum, An die in Berlin weilenden Herren der Studienkommission des Internationalen Genossenschaftsbundes, 36.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

In spite of these efforts, the ICA became aware of the repression and violation of basic co-operative principles taking place in the East German *Konsum*. The position taken by the ICA, nevertheless, did not deter the East Germans from attempting to join the ICA in 1948, only to be rejected. Again, in mid-1949, six regional co-operative unions of the VDK applied for membership into the ICA. In response, the ICA executive stalled and the applications were considered only in November 1949, as the ICA's experts doubted that DDR co-operatives were democratic. As a result, a debate within the ICA ensued over how Rochdale co-operative principles could be followed within a Communist system.⁴⁶⁶ This debate again resulted in the rejection of the DDR in 1949, as the ICA determined the following:

Co-operative Organization must be completely free and independent and must be able to take up a position with regard to all the problems which affect their own interests, or the general interests, independent of the State and public authorities generally, as well as of private organizations (political parties). In countries where a dictatorship exists, and where there is substantially only one party and a single political movement, where the right of free association is denied and where any divergent opinions are suppressed, free and independent Co-operative Organization cannot exist.⁴⁶⁷

The central committee of the ICA met in Helsinki in 1950 and confirmed that East German membership should be rejected, along with several other Eastern European applications. Fairbairn writes that the ICA's decision to reject East Germany's application "appears understandable not only on the basis of who composed the ICA, but also – even more so – on the basis of the information available to it [SPD sources]. As we have seen, the information on what was occurring in East Germany was not 100 percent accurate, but it was accurate enough for all that."⁴⁶⁸ Subsequently, the 1954 and 1960 East German applications were rejected.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 19.

⁴⁶⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the ICA Executive, 1949, as quoted in Rhodes, *The International Co-operative Alliance During War and Peace*: 332.

⁴⁶⁸ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 19-21; *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

During the 1950s and 1960s very few, if any, Western and capitalist countries, including West Germany and the United States, recognized the DDR as a state. Wider recognition only came in the 1970s with the onset of improved relations between East and West Germany based on the policy of *Ostpolitik*.⁴⁷⁰ In accordance with *Ostpolitik*, the SED wanted to use the *Konsum*'s membership in the ICA as a platform to promote its principles, foreign policy initiatives, and struggle for peace. According to an archival document from 1961, "the *Konsum* had to struggle for the diplomatic recognition of the DDR and for the improvement of its standing and authority on the world stage."⁴⁷¹ To accomplish these objectives, the *Konsum* produced propaganda brochures (*Auslandspropaganda des VDK*) entitled "The Democracy in the Consumer Co-operatives of the German Democratic Republic" and "Welcome to the Consumer Co-operatives in the DDR." All of these were printed in three foreign languages.⁴⁷²

East German *Konsum* publications berated West Germany and its co-operative organizations for rejecting its membership application. In an article published in 1957 from the cooperative publication *Blick vorwärts*, Werner Krüger argues that the ICA and the "Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften [ZdK or West German cooperatives] were, although under a so-called the 'flag of neutrality', actively supporting West German political initiatives."⁴⁷³ Krüger also suggested, "monopoly capitalism, which was personified by the West German government, has suppressed the ZdK from becoming an antifascist mass-organization and rejected the *Konsum*'s application."⁴⁷⁴ The Soviet representative in the ICA described the *Konsum*'s rejections from this organization in Paris in 1960 as "blatant political discrimination"

⁴⁷⁰ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*: 181.

⁴⁷¹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/137, Author Unknown, Bericht über die Prüfung der Abteilung „Internationale Verbindungen und Außenhandel“ des VDK, Berlin, den 25.1.1961, 1.

⁴⁷² Ibid., 9.

⁴⁷³ Werner Krüger, "Über Scharlatane, Neutralitätspolitik und den „Rahmen“ konsumgenossenschaftlicher Tätigkeit," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 7.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 148-49.

directed towards co-operative organizations from socialist countries. “This discrimination had resulted in,” according to his speech, “the divisions of the co-operative movement.”⁴⁷⁵

At an international co-operative conference held in the DDR in 1966, President Weiss, the acting president of the VDK, encouraged the ICA to recognize the DDR and co-operative societies in emerging communist states in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Only then, as Weiss believed, would the ICA develop into a truly international organization. In the following quotation, it seems that Herr Weiss wanted the legitimacy of ICA membership, while downplaying its recurring rejection of communist states:

The International Co-operative Alliance is called upon to unite the co-operative forces of the world. But the ICA today has no more than 163 million co-operative members; it thus unites far less than half of all co-operative members in the world within its ranks. The extension of international co-operative relations and contacts calls for a contribution by the ICA to an exchange of delegations, literature and experiences in the sphere of co-operative construction. Co-operatives at present not yet members of the ICA should not be excluded from that co-operation. The time has come to pursue a policy of friendly co-operation on an equal footing, as aspired by the DDR and by many states of Africa, Asia and Latin America; the time has come for the ICA to develop into a genuinely international organization which unites co-operative members of the whole world.⁴⁷⁶

The ICA, however, rejected the appeal of President Weiss. After all, this was the time of the Cold War, which heavily impacted West German relations with the VDK.

In 1969, there was a change of West German leadership from Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a CDU politician who perceived the DDR as an aberration, to Willy Brandt. In 1970, Brandt championed the easing of Cold War tensions via his foreign policy initiative hailed as *Ost-Politik*. In return for improved relations with the Soviet Bloc, West Germany recognized the DDR as a state; this also meant an improvement in relations between East and West German co-operatives. The leading committee of the ICA voted unanimously in Bucharest in October 1971

⁴⁷⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/137, Rede des sowjetischen Vertreters auf der Tagung des Zentralkomitees des IGB zur Frage der Mitgliedschaft, Paris, Januar 1960, 1.

⁴⁷⁶ AKB: 1114/A18 Written down at friends, May 1966, 30.

to include the *Konsum*. At this Congress of the ICA, it was suddenly determined that the *Konsum* had made enough progress to be granted membership. The former reasons for denial included the lack of independent planning due to subjugation to the state's planning authorities; forced or state driven co-operation (*Zwangsgenossenschaften*); the absence of political neutrality; and being under the authority of a third party – the SED.⁴⁷⁷

As a member of the International Co-operative Alliance, the *Konsum* worked closely with co-operatives from the Soviet Bloc, as well as from western states. According to an official DDR publication from 1985, the *Konsum* – through its connections within the ICA – resolutely strove for peace, social progress, and the elimination of the arms race. The consumer co-operatives were also committed to the national and social liberation of struggling peoples. Specifically, at the *Konsum*'s international co-operative school, cadres from “nationally liberated” states were educated. Many of these countries were going through a process of decolonization and maintaining or establishing ties to the Soviet Union, including Cuba, Kenya, Uganda, Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Basutoland, Iraq, Indonesia, India, and Burma. The VDK also maintained active relations with special organizations of the United Nations, as well as UNESCO and ILO.⁴⁷⁸ At the Tenth *Konsum* Congress in May 1988, the then President of the ICA, Lars Marcus, was in attendance and actively participated. During his welcoming address, he declared “I bring you greetings from the ICA, in which the *Konsum* is a highly-valued member. Your membership is a representation of the co-operative tradition functioning in your

⁴⁷⁷ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 104.

⁴⁷⁸ Karl Becher, Richard Mand, and Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft der DDR., *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in der DDR: Massenorganisationen, Verbände, Vereinigungen, Gesellschaften, Genossenschaften, Komitees, Ligen*, 1.Aufl. -- ed. (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1985), 107.

civilized society... With great certainty, I have been witness to the *Konsum*'s many achievements."⁴⁷⁹

5.2. *Konsum* relations with co-operatives in foreign countries

The *Konsum* represented the DDR internationally by sending its delegates and functionaries to co-operative organizations in Western countries. For instance, a delegation of the VDK met in Rome for the seventieth anniversary of Italy's *Lega Nazionale delle Co-operative e Mutue*. The VDK also sent a delegation to Sweden to study the operation of self-service stores. Members of the VDK, in addition, visited and were apparently warmly received at a consumer co-operative in Nottingham, England. Furthermore, the *Konsum* engaged in literature exchanges and sent its publications to fifty-nine co-operative organizations in thirty-six countries.⁴⁸⁰ Within these international settings, the *Konsum* maintained the party line and supported the international actions of the Soviet Union. For instance, the *Konsum* and its then 3.3 million members, at least on paper, officially supported the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (or in the view of the DDR, the counter-revolution). In fact, the *Konsum* supported Soviet troops by donating trucks,⁴⁸¹ shoes, and clothing as a sign of support for the internationalism of the proletariat and of opposition to the counter-revolutionary threat emerging from within Hungary.⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁹ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 105.

⁴⁸⁰ SWA: U2/618, Geschäftsbericht des Vorstands des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften für das Jahr 1956, Beschlossen auf der 8. Tagung des Genossenschaftsrates des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 8.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸² Ibid.



Illustration 14: In a sign of support of communist rule, the *Konsum* sent trucks to co-operatives in Hungary in 1956

The *Konsum* hosted international co-operative conferences, symposiums, exchanges, and congresses. For propaganda purposes, the *Konsum* deliberately wanted to host, educate, and support co-operators from emerging post-colonial nations and emerging communist countries. Specifically, during the early 1960s, the *Konsum* maintained close relations with co-operators from Cuba, Kenya, Uganda, Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Basutoland, Iraq, Indonesia, India, and Burma.⁴⁸³ These symposiums were designed for international students to develop specific perceptions of the DDR, namely to persuade them that East Germany was a supporter of a peaceful and nuclear-free Europe. Moreover, the *Konsum* had to convince its fellow co-operators of the dangers of West German militarism and the necessity of a German peace accord and the resolution to the Berlin problem – that is, the reasons for the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The *Konsum* also attempted to promote normalized relations with any country that

⁴⁸³ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/138, Information über die Verbindungen des Verbandes Deutscher KGen zu den Genossenschaftsorganisationen der Länder Afrikas, Asiens und Latienamerikas, VDK – Berlin, den 11.5.1962, 1.

would give the DDR official state recognition (Iraq was one of the first non-communist states to recognize the DDR in May 1969).⁴⁸⁴

In 1966, the *Konsum* hosted the Third International Symposium of the Union of German Consumer Co-operatives Societies, under the slogan: “The Role and Tasks of Co-operatives in the Transition to a Socialist System of Society.” The symposium ran for one week in Halle during which the *Konsum* hosted representatives from Algeria, Burma, Ceylon, Chile, Czechoslovakia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Poland, Uruguay, the UAR, and Zambia.⁴⁸⁵ Guests at the conference were able to attend lectures such as the “The Development of Socialist Relations of Production in DDR Agriculture and the Role of Co-operatives in this Process,” which was given by Dr. Friedrich, Director of the Institute of Agrarian Economy at the University for Agricultural Production Co-operatives. Attendees were also taken on tours of the various types of collective farms.⁴⁸⁶ The VDK President, Weiss, delivered a lecture on the development of co-operatives and their current situation in the DDR. In his estimation, “the consumer co-operative societies will constantly continue to extend their international relations and to consolidate them. At present regular contacts exist with co-operative organizations in fifty-eight countries.”⁴⁸⁷ The general impression the *Konsum* tried to extend to international delegates was that of success in both centralized administrative policies and collective farming policies.⁴⁸⁸

On a micro-level, individual East German co-operatives, for their part, sought to engage in contemporary political activities with developing states; for illustration, the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Stadt-Leipzig* protested on 5 May 1970 what it perceived as the crimes of

⁴⁸⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/138, Der Vorstand beschließt den beiliegenden Perspektivplan der Abteilung Int. Verbindungen für das Jahr 1963," 4.

⁴⁸⁵ AKB: 1114/A18 Written down at friends, May 1966, 3-4.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 40.

the Nixon administration in Cambodia. In the name of its 3,600 members, it demanded the withdrawal of all American soldiers from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. To demonstrate their solidarity with Cambodia and in protest of the bombing of North Vietnam, a number of workers from this consumer co-operative personally signed a protest resolution.⁴⁸⁹ Here, it should be noted that war and peace were – given German history – real and legitimate worries of the East German people.⁴⁹⁰ On a larger scale, during the 1970s, the *Konsum* along with the United Nations supported the development of young states. The *Konsum* defined this decade as the “Decade of Cooperative Development” and hosted the 43rd ICA Seminar in Dresden in 1975 (see Illustration 15), which was attended by representatives from socialist, capitalist, and developing countries, as well as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization.⁴⁹¹ As seen in Illustrations 15 and 16, representatives of the *Konsum* took an active part in conferences both domestically and internationally.



Illustration 15: The 43rd ICA Seminar held in Dresden in 1975

⁴⁸⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 3297, Protestresolution der Betriebsgewerkschaftsleitung zur barbarischen Aggression in Kambodscha, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, den 5. Mai 1970.

⁴⁹⁰ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*: 135.

⁴⁹¹ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, *The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic*, 95.



Illustration 16: Representatives of the *Konsum* at the ICA Regional Seminar for East and Central Africa in Tanzania⁴⁹²

Exchanges of *Konsum* workers to other socialist countries, especially young skilled workers (waiters, cooks, confectioners, butchers and shop assistants from department stores) were not uncommon. In 1975, one thousand of these young specialists were able to broaden their knowledge of foreign languages as well as co-operative institutions from neighbouring socialist states. These interactions promoted cordial relations between delegates. For this reason, the exchange of skilled workers was, according to then president of the *Konsum*, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, to “remain a critical component of international co-operation throughout the period of 1976 to 1980.”⁴⁹³

Another important aspect of international co-operation was the exchange of consumer goods in order to enrich the quantity and variety of available goods on the domestic markets. This was achieved through the so-called “goods from fraternal countries weeks” (see illustration below) in which goods from foreign countries were made available. In 1976, there were seventeen such weeks in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, during

⁴⁹² Ibid., 105.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 90.

which goods from the DDR were sold. In turn, an equal amount of imported goods were sold in *Konsum* department stores in Cottbus, Leipzig, Plauen, Stralsund, and other cities in the DDR.⁴⁹⁴



Illustration 17: “Goods from fraternal countries”

The description of the image says, “Business was booming in Leipzig’s “konsument” department store from the first hour on during a sale organized jointly with ‘SPOLEM’ (Poland’s nationwide cooperative network) at which merchandise from our two countries was featured”

5.3. Relations with West Germany

From the vantage point of East German co-operators, the West German consumer co-operatives remained a capitalist enterprise in which democratic participation did not exist.⁴⁹⁵ Furthermore, there were primary differences in the development of the consumer co-operatives in the Western Zones in contrast to consumer co-operatives in the SBZ. For example, in the SBZ, land reform – at least according to the East German co-operators – resulted in the removal of the “monopolists” and this established the conditions for the free development of legitimate working-class co-operatives. By contrast, in the Western Zones, the continued rule of the

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ SWA: U2/SWA 1569/6, Fragen und Antworten über die Konsumgenossenschaften (Date not given).

capitalists – as the East German co-operators claimed – “had hindered the workers’ efforts to transform the consumer co-operatives into a workers’ mass-organization.”⁴⁹⁶

In spite of these ideological differences between East and West Germany, the then president of the ICA, Lord Rusholme, sought to create a unified German co-operative association. Looking back, the attempts to create a unified German association began in March 1947 at a meeting of co-operators in Hamburg. While there, delegates from the SBZ and Western Zones discussed the creation of a unified co-operative institution. However, as they developed basic principles for this organization, conflicts arose between the delegates over the questionable political neutrality of the consumer co-operatives in the SBZ. Thus, these negotiations were delayed for a considerable time until it was finally determined that the objective of a unified co-operative system was illusory.⁴⁹⁷ During this long delay, co-operators in the American and British zones formed the Hamburg based Central Federation of German Consumer Co-operatives (*Zentralverbandes deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften für das vereinigte Wirtschaftsgebiet*, **ZdK**) in September 1948. As a result, the division of the German co-operative movement was solidified.⁴⁹⁸

Relations between the VDK and West German co-operatives were often confrontational.⁴⁹⁹ In fact, the administration of the *Konsum* – the VDK – was created as a bulwark against the influence from the Wholesale Society of German Consumer Co-operatives (*Großeinkaufs-Gesellschaft*, **GEG**) and the ZdK.⁵⁰⁰ According to a report of the consumer co-operative in Berlin from 14 September 1948:

⁴⁹⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Beschluß der gemeinschaftlichen Sitzung von Beirat, date not given, 49.

⁴⁹⁷ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 4.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 1370, Entwurf der EntschlieÙung zum Genossenschaftstag am 26./27. Aug. 49.

⁵⁰⁰ Birchall, *The international co-operative movement*: 87.

Through the newly constituted GEG in Hamburg, through the foundation of an Association of the Consumer Co-operatives for the Tri-Zone (*Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften für die Tri-zone*) and through the proposed admission of the consumer co-operatives of the Western Zones into the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) without the co-operation of the consumer co-operatives of the East Zone, the representatives of the consumer co-operatives in Hamburg had created the division of the German consumer co-operative movement... The GEG in Hamburg could never be described as a legitimate representation of the German consumer co-operative movement, because the co-operative members living in the eastern zone did not stand behind it.⁵⁰¹



Illustration 18: *Konsum* poster calling for the unity of the German co-operative movement⁵⁰²

Following the creation of separate East and West German states in 1949, as seen in Illustration 18, the co-operators from their respective Germany became more vocal in their struggle for a unified Germany under the auspices of their respective ideological orientation. There was a great deal of suspicion and mistrust between the two co-operative organizations. According to *Konsum* propagandists and agitators, West German consumer co-operatives supported the Adenauer-government's preparation for war and the remilitarisation of West

⁵⁰¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Bericht: Über die Zonenkonferenz der Konsumgenossenschaften in Berlin am 14.9.1948, 93-95.

⁵⁰² LAB: F Rep. 260-02 B 271.

Germany and were actively working to deepen the division of Germany.⁵⁰³ Germany's division was always provisional; reunification was always in play and a possibility at least in the minds of German leaders from east and west. Therefore, each Germany (and within each Germany, each co-op organization) could claim national leadership and legitimacy over the whole of Germany. East German propagandists attempted to use this alleged legitimacy to conduct propaganda campaigns in the West.

The zonal division of Berlin did not stop *Konsum* propagandists from conducting campaigns in West Berlin. In 1954, for instance, the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick* conducted political and propaganda work in West Berlin. This co-operative had a department of politics and ideology that developed propaganda leaflets for distribution in the West Berlin borough of Schöneberg. It reported that the majority of West Berliners took the leaflets and specified certain responses from a number of West Berliners. For instance, Luise W., who lived on Monumentenstraße, accepted propaganda material and declared that she was fully in agreement with the *Konsum*'s ideological arguments. An actress living on Emerstraße reported that she did not have time for a discussion and little interest in political events, but she was still willing to take the *Konsum*'s propaganda material. Frau R., living on Prinz-Georg-Straße, was apparently open-minded about this propaganda initiative. On the other hand, Herr S. was reported as refusing the ideological leaflets and expressing that the SED was a totalitarian party which should be forbidden.⁵⁰⁴

At the shop level, employees at a *Konsum* store also did their part to improve German-German relations. In 1958, President Lucht instructed the Leipzig consumer co-operative to begin work with the West German consumer co-operatives. At this time, *Konsum*

⁵⁰³ SWA: U2/SWA 1569/6, Anleitung für den Agitator der Konsumgenossenschaft (date not given), 2.

⁵⁰⁴ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 4, Informationsbericht, AB Politische Massenaarbeit, KGVGB, 2.12.54, 1-3.

Genossenschaft-Leipzig set a goal to double its delegation work with West Germany. At the foreground of this effort was the improvement in the quality of the delegations to enable them to explain the fundamental problems of capitalism to their West German friends. In so doing, this consumer co-operative attempted to give their West German counterparts the opportunity to resist the Adenauer administration and government. This was to be accomplished by helping these co-ops become true workers' organizations that would resist price and tax increases.⁵⁰⁵ In a further example, employees at a *Konsum* retail outlet in Leipzig attempted to initiate mail correspondence with West German co-operators; however, they received no reply. In July 1962, another attempt was made to establish contact, but again received no response. In spite of this, the workers at this *Konsum* store continued in their attempts to contact the West Germans and support the *Konsum*'s international work and improve German-German relations.⁵⁰⁶

Inter-German co-operative relations became ever more influenced by the Cold War. During the late 1950s, the primary objective of *Konsum* German-German relations was to gain the support of the West German consumer co-operatives in the Warsaw Pact's struggle against NATO, and for an atomic weapons-free-zone in the middle of Europe.⁵⁰⁷ In an interview with a former *Konsum* employee, Martin Bergner states, "As an international organization, the role of the *Konsum* was to introduce foreigners – particularly West Germans – to socialist ideas."⁵⁰⁸ He also states that *Konsum* international relations were a way by which to attain "foreign currency," though he does not elaborate on how this was achieved. Perhaps the *Konsum* was able to raise some foreign currency through its relations with West Germany; however, Bergner ultimately

⁵⁰⁵ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, Die nächsten Aufgaben der Konsum-Genossenschaften des Bezirkes Leipzig im 2. Fünfjahrplan, 36-39.

⁵⁰⁶ SWA: U2/I66, Verwirklichung der Aufgaben der nationalen Genossenschaftsarbeit (Date not given).

⁵⁰⁷ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, Entschließung der 6. Genossenschafts-ratstagung des KGV Bezirk Leipzig, Leipzig, am 28. Februar 1958, 1.

⁵⁰⁸ Author's interview with Martin Bergner (former economist for the *Konsum* and current Spokesperson for the Zentralkonsum), Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

describes the relationship between East and West German co-operatives as “distant” and “aloof” (*distanziert*).⁵⁰⁹ More broadly, the representatives often gained valuable insight into each other’s co-operative movements and the economic and political ideologies of their respective German state.⁵¹⁰ Historian Annette Kaminsky argues that, especially during the 1950s the primary role (*Hauptaufgabe*) of the *Konsum* was not to supply the population with consumer goods; rather, it was to support the will of the SED in its apparent struggle for international peace and the unity of Germany.⁵¹¹

In the 1960s, the *Konsum* adopted the role of educator and mentor to its West German counterparts in an attempt to “help the West German co-operators in their struggle for the unity of action of the working class and to have a political influence on them.”⁵¹² In fact, the *Konsum* even began regular and systematic weekend schools designed for short study/vacation stays intended for West Germans.⁵¹³ In 1961, for instance, 204 West German consumer co-operators spent a fourteen-day vacation in the DDR, during which they participated in systematic political schooling. As stated in a document titled *Evaluation of the Vacation-Schools in 1961*, “this method of educational work with the West Germans has proven to be especially important in explaining the significance of the current political situation [the Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961]. Through this education, the basic tenets of Marxism will be systematically carried to West German working classes.”⁵¹⁴ Underpinning the *Konsum*’s international and educational work with the West German consumer co-operatives was the notion that the DDR

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker. Date not given, Genossenschaftswesen, 81.

⁵¹¹ Annette Kaminsky, “Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR (VdK),” in *Die Parteien und Organisationen in der DDR. Ein Handbuch*, ed. Stephan Gerd-Rüdiger (2002), 737.

⁵¹² SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/136, Beschluss des Vorstandes des VDK zur Verbesserung und Erhöhung der Wirksamkeit der nationalen Genossenschaftsarbeit (Auswertung der 9. Tagung des ZK der SED), 6.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/136, Auswertung der Urlauberschulung 1961 und Plan für die Urlauberschulung 1962, 1.

embodied the societal lessons of the struggles of the working classes and the best German patriots, and was based on great scientific and humanist traditions. The *Konsum* had to help convince East Germans that the primary objective of the DDR was to ensure peace and security between the two Germanies, so that the objectives of the socialist construction could be completed. However, according to the *Konsum* there were clear strains in the relationships between the two co-operative organizations. Conflicts arose from the *Konsum*'s belief that West Germany placed profits above human rights, the dangers of Neo-Nazism, and the treacherous politics of the SPD. Therefore, the *Konsum* – whenever there was contact with West German co-operative representatives – attempted to introduce Marxist-Leninist literature to West Germans in an attempt to augment their class-consciousness.⁵¹⁵

In 1969, the education of the West German co-operators (especially women and youth) was the focus of the twentieth anniversary celebrations of the founding of the DDR. Specifically, the East Germans wanted to instil in West Germans the notion that their government was a tool and restorer of capitalism in Europe and that only when the working population was in control would it be possible to ensure that West Germany had a future of peace, democracy, and progress.⁵¹⁶ In this effort, the *Konsum* primarily targeted West German women and sought to explain to them the magnitude of the East German constitution in its defence of women's rights. The *Konsum* even gave itself the goal of establishing student groups and educational opportunities for women in the West German city of Dortmund. Conversely, West German women were invited to attend the *Konsum*'s vocational schools in the DDR. In a

⁵¹⁵ SWA: U2/(SWA 266) 545, Arbeitsplan für das Aktiv – westdeutsche Genossenschaftsfragen 2. Halbjahr 1969, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, den 15.7.1969, 4.

⁵¹⁶ SWA: U2/(SWA 266) 545, Arbeitsplan für das Aktive – Westdeutsche Genossenschaftsfrage, 1. Halbjahr 1969, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, d. 2.1.1969, 1.

similar vein, the *Konsum* also set a target to “gain the support of fifteen young West Germans by the end of the year 1969.”⁵¹⁷

More generally, the objective of *Konsum* propaganda work with West Germany was to demonstrate that the DDR embodied the best traditions of the German working class movement and to improve relations between East and West. This effort was also an attempt to have West Germans learn to trust the political nature of the DDR and to educate them about the fundamentals of life in a workers’ and peasants’ state. Some of this was attempted through individual contact via letter correspondence and through educational trips and stays in the DDR.⁵¹⁸ Of course, the objective of German-German co-operative relations reflected the ebb and flow of the Cold War. For instance, during the 1950s and 1960s, relations between the two co-operative organizations, at least from the vantage point of East German archival documents, were strained with the *Konsum* portraying West German co-operative leaders and Social Democrats as right-wing and supporters of war policies and imperialism.⁵¹⁹ During the 1970s and 1980s, it seems as though relations improved and the *Konsum*’s rhetoric and discourse towards the West German co-operators became subdued. At least this is the impression given in an archival document produced in the late 1980s, which states, “Normal and constructive relations had developed between the *Konsum* and the *Bund deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*.”⁵²⁰ The document continues by pointedly declaring, “Both sides were taking measures and working together to strengthen the ICA, the co-operative

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 3-5.

⁵¹⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/136, Schwerpunkt – Arbeitsplan für die nationale Genossenschaftsarbeit nach dem XXII. Parteitag und der 14. Tagung des ZK der SED, date not given, 11.

⁵¹⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/136, 1962,” 6.

⁵²⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8994, Vereinbarung zwischen dem Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und dem Bund deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften der Bundesrepublik Deutschland für den Zeitraum 1988 bis 1990, 1-2.

movement, the interests of co-operatives, the peace initiatives, and societal progress in developing nations.’’⁵²¹

5.4. International education

The party members in the executive of the VDK recognized the importance of the *Konsum*’s educational network as a way to politically educate and develop the class-consciousness of leading functionaries in the local organizations, as well as co-operators from around the world.⁵²² The VDK especially supported educational measures in developing countries and was responsible for the co-operative schools and the publication of instructional material for international use.⁵²³

The *Konsum* began to train international students in the early 1960s at its technical school in Blankenburg (Harz Mountains), with the aim of spreading co-operative ideas and promoting the governmental system of the Soviet Union and East Germany. The primary objective of the school was to train co-operative officials from developing (socialist) countries, pass on the lessons learned in the co-operative systems of the DDR and the Soviet Union, and establish close relations with similar co-operative institutions in other countries. Building on the experience gained at Blankenburg, the *Konsum* opened the International Co-operative School of the Union of the Consumer Co-operative Societies of the DDR in Dresden in 1967.⁵²⁴

The *Konsum*’s International School in Dresden served a propaganda role. It was charged with promoting and disseminating some of the fundamentals of the DDR’s antifascist state-narrative to foreign students. This national narrative was succinctly put in a 1974 booklet

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 12.

⁵²³ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 15-16.

⁵²⁴ AKB: 1114/A15, Welcome to the International Co-operative College, 1974, ed. Werner Krüger (Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR), 14-15.

entitled *Welcome to the International Co-operative College*, which was given to students attending the *Konsum*'s International School. It stated, "The German Democratic Republic is a highly developed socialist industrialized country with a modern agriculture and food industry and counts among the world's ten most efficient industrial countries."⁵²⁵



Illustration 19: International Students at the International Cooperative School in Dresden, 1975

According to figures and captions associated with this image from the original archival document, "over 700 co-op officials have attended courses lasting mainly five or ten months. The members and staff of the DDR's co-ops regard cooperative solidarity as a fundamental principle of their international work, of which the International Cooperative School opened in 1961 is but one example."⁵²⁶

The courses offered at the International Co-operative School were generally designed to further train managers, while exchanging experiences among the international student body. Accordingly, only students who had gained considerable experience as managers of co-operatives were eligible to attend. Students were also required to have previous training and general education in the field of co-operative trade in their respective home country. During the period from 1961 to 1974, the *Konsum* trained approximately 300 students from more than forty

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁵²⁶ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, *The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic*, 97.

countries in nine ten-month-courses and 260 students in nine five-month-courses. The courses were conducted in English, French, or Arabic.⁵²⁷ Nine teachers (four of whom had doctoral degrees) were responsible for conducting these courses, and all of them had completed college courses in the field of economics or agriculture, as well as pedagogy. In addition to these teachers, guest lecturers dealt with specific subjects regarding co-operative practices. Students were required to take part in lectures, private study, seminars, colloquia, and attend individual and group consultations; generally, this teaching program amounted to about forty hours a week. There was also a particular focus on theory in practice, which meant that there were a number of excursions to co-operative establishments in Berlin, Leipzig, Karl Marx Stadt (Chemnitz) and so on. Students underwent evaluations in various subjects through both oral and written performance tests. Finally, the students received a monthly stipend of 300 East German Marks (*Marken der deutsche Notenbank*, **MdN**), with a 70 MdN deduction for board and lodging.⁵²⁸ By 1975, 750 members of co-operatives from forty countries had been trained at the *Konsum*'s international school in Dresden. Another 500 managers were slated to attend courses by the end of the 1970s.⁵²⁹

There were exchanges of students between co-operative educational institutions, especially between the DDR and the Soviet Union. The results of these were, according to *Konsum* President Fahrenkrog in 1975, "very positive." Besides this, there were exchanges with the co-operative associations of Poland, Czechoslovakia, twelve Asian countries, African and Middle East countries, and other developing countries, whose students were studying at *Konsum*

⁵²⁷ AKB: 1114/A15, Welcome to the International Co-operative College, 1974, 14-16.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 18-21.

⁵²⁹ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic, 103.

facilities. As of 1976, further preparations were being made to carry out co-operative educational projects, including the “scientific elaboration of the subject matter.”⁵³⁰



Illustration 20: International Conference, circa 1975

According to the figures and captions associated with this image from the original archival document, “Regular conferences of experts from co-operative organizations of socialist countries are an important part of international activities. The International Co-operative School hosted a conference dealing with the principles of further development of co-operation in the field of co-operative educational work”⁵³¹

5.5. Conclusions

In the immediate postwar years, there was limited collaboration between the consumer co-operatives in the SBZ and the Western Zones. In fact, the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Wedding* (a West Berlin district) was, for a short time, a member of the *Konsumverband-Berlin-Ost*. This co-operative received a portion of its goods from the Soviet Sector and was able to serve customers from East and West Berlin until September 1952.⁵³² However, *Konsum* relations with its western counterparts reflected the ebb and flow of the Cold War; during the particularly intense periods, the *Konsum* turned inwards and towards the communist world to strengthen its ties with emerging Soviet allies in Africa, as well as countries in Central American and Asia. The *Konsum* attempted to support these countries in what it perceived as their struggle for

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁵³¹ Ibid., 91.

⁵³² Klaus Leuchtmann, "Bus zum bitteren Ende: Die Geschichte der Konsumgenossenschaft Wedding," in *Der Wedding - Hart and Der Grenze: Weiterleben in Berlin nach dem Krieg*, ed. Roland Schwarz and Angelika Rix (Berlin: Dirk Nishen, 1987), 161-63.

freedom. Finally, these international initiatives from the vantage point of the DDR were key components of *Konsum* propaganda.⁵³³

During the late 1980s, relations between the VDK and the West German co-operatives improved. Within the Central Committee of the SED, a commission under the Leadership of Economics Minister Günter Mittag coordinated the activities between both German states. The president of the VDK and the FDJ suggested co-operating with the West German consumer co-operatives. The President of the ZdK, Herr Busman, positively responded to the offer of co-operation with the VDK. The collaboration between the two co-operative federations involved activities to ensure peace, tourism, delegation exchanges, economic and technical collaboration, an archival exchange, and an intern exchange (10 interns for two to three weeks).⁵³⁴ Yet, Dr. Burchard Bösche (an executive with the Hamburg based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*) states:

This tension between the two co-operative organizations dates back to when the Hamburg based wholesaler, *Großeinkaufs-Gesellschaft*, lost substantial amounts of its property in East Germany, which was requisitioned by the Soviets and given to the *Konsum*. As a result, the relations between the ZdK, a West German co-operative organization, and the *Zentralkonsum* (the successor to the *Konsum*) remain “cool” to this day.⁵³⁵

As presaged in Part I, this chapter has shown what the SED wanted to do with the *Konsum* in relation to the SED’s foreign policy. It is difficult to accurately measure the impact of the *Konsum*’s international work, but what is certain is that the *Konsum* advocated SED foreign policy and was a microcosm of the ways in which the Cold War impacted East German institutions. That is to say, when relations improved between East and West, there were also

⁵³³ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁵³⁴ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS ZAIG Nr. 6514, Stand der Vereinbarung zur Zusammenarbeit des VdK der DDR mit dem Bund Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften der BRD (BDK) – einschließlich Praktikantenaustausch, Berlin, 12. April 1988, 4.

⁵³⁵ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Vorstandsmitglied - Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

improved relations amongst East and West German co-operative societies. The most evident example of this was when the *Konsum* was accepted into the ICA in 1971 during a detente in the Cold War. More importantly, *Konsum* foreign policy illustrates the subservience of this organization to the SED by promulgating the antifascist state narrative to international students and foreign co-operators. For instance, throughout the mountains of archival documents adduced from the *Konsum*, Americans are almost always referred to as imperialists, West Germans as fascists, the Hungarians in 1956 as dangerous counter-revolutionaries, and the Soviets as the helpful big brother. The following chapter will continue with the theme of persuasion by taking a closer look at *Konsum* education.

6. Becoming transmission-belts: education and the conveyance of ideology

The consumer co-operatives placed a great value on the education of their employees and functionaries and the active collaboration of its membership, especially with women so that they can serve in the exorcism of the demon of Nazism and the development of a democratic and peaceful Germany.

- An archival document from 1948 in Berlin⁵³⁶

The *Konsum*'s teaching of socialist consciousness had to abolish foreign, capitalist influence and struggle against antiquated "habits" lingering from the capitalism epoch. A conciliatory tolerance of the capitalist influence would only hinder the construction of socialism. Socialist education in the *Konsum* schools was directly connected with the struggle between progressive forces and outmoded tendencies.

- As stated by Walter Ulbricht in 1958⁵³⁷



Illustration 21: *Konsum* education with a predominantly female student body (circa 1950s)⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, Die Konsumgenossenschaftsbewegung in Deutschland, Berlin, 4. Februar 1948, 104.

⁵³⁷ Erich Wischnewski, "Konsumarchiv -- Entfaltet in allen genossenschaftlichen Organisationen den sozialistischen Wettbewerb nach dem Beispiel des KGV Kreis Wittenberg," in *Blick vorwärts: Zeitschrift für die Arbeit der Funktionäre in den Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (1958), 71.

⁵³⁸ SSC: 30878/1124 (circa 1950s).

The *Konsum*'s inclusion of women in the education process at the onset of the Soviet occupation and during the lifespan of the DDR was modern and progressive. This "inclusion" had a parallel function of generating female loyalty for the state. Nevertheless, the initial inclusion of women in these co-operative schools was, in my measured opinion, a first step towards multiple educational opportunities in technological fields at various polytechnic high schools.⁵³⁹ In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, women were, according to historian Jeannette Madarász, able to fulfill their search for self-realization through social advancement and further education.⁵⁴⁰ In acts of subtle resistance, however, workers expressed their disinclination to pay attention to the régime's "education" by switching off political broadcasts at the workplace and coughing during political presentations. With that said, the attitudinal and behavioural effects of the régime's ideological politics on the various segments of the East German population should not be underestimated. In fact, women may have reacted differently to politicized education (i.e., welcomed the opportunity) as compared to youth and men.⁵⁴¹ According to historian Jeannette Madarász, women were more loyal to the régime than other segments of the population given their educational opportunities.⁵⁴²

⁵³⁹ Dolores L. Augustine, *Red Prometheus: Engineering and Dictatorship in East Germany, 1945-1990* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 98.

⁵⁴⁰ Madarász, *Working in East Germany*: 6.

⁵⁴¹ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 100.

⁵⁴² Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany*: 92. To make this conclusion, Madarász draws on statistical materials produced by Gunnar Winkler, the former director of the *Institut für Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* of the DDR. These reports were titled *Frauenreport'90*. However, as she maintains, it is difficult to draw concrete conclusions about women in the DDR against the backdrop of female state sanctioned legal equality. Yet, Irene Dölling, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Potsdam University, and Hildegard-Maria Nickel, Director of the Centre of Women's Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin, have made fruitful contributions to the field of research on women and gender studies in the DDR. Already by the 1980s, they were focusing on the double burden for women, gender specific segregation, and patriarchy within the socialist system. Their work in this area has been authoritative ever since. To make a further point, research dealing with women is, according to Madarász, underdeveloped, since there are few studies that deal directly with the DFD. And, in her words, "the situation of women represents a major path into understanding the internal dynamics of East German society. They made up almost half the workforce, brought up future generations, and were heavily involved in the upheavals of 1988 and 1989. Their impact on society, and that of society on women, must be looked at more closely." *Ibid.*, 12-14.

The *Konsum* and the SED believed that the consumer co-operatives had to develop into a progressive, democratic, and antifascist mass-organization of consumers, with an ideologically trained body of functionaries. However, as the party believed in 1949, the correct type of ideological thinking was underdeveloped; to alleviate this, the *Konsum* developed co-operative schools and colleges to overcome these apparent weaknesses.⁵⁴³ This chapter considers how the *Konsum* functioned as an educational network in the SBZ. Within the co-operative organization's educational classes, there was an evident transmission of co-operative ideology, Cold War politics, and the gendered propaganda of the SED. In his article *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*, Wilhelm Kaltenborn asks rhetorically, "what can we discern from the programme of study to which women were subjected in the co-operative schools?"⁵⁴⁴ This chapter addresses this question and argues that *Konsum* employees were trained to become ideological conduits or transmission-belts of SED ideology.

6.1. The founding and organization of *Konsum* schools – types of courses

In 1946, the state and provincial co-operatives were responsible for providing the co-operative workers with opportunities for further education and training.⁵⁴⁵ The SED believed that education was a robust method of strengthening the *Konsum*; in practice, this meant that workers had to undertake courses in "progressive democracy." In June 1947, Helmut Lehmann, the Central Secretariat of the SED in Berlin, commented on co-operative schools:

The co-operatives needed to be an important school for the economic insight and socialist economic thought, but they had to also spread co-operative ideology in the service of the family. In addition to that, they can and should be schools for the development of administrative skills. One cannot administer a state with political and economic illiterates. Only when we have socialist educated functionaries will we have achieved our goal. I suggest, therefore, that we establish co-operative schools for the

⁵⁴³ SWA: U2/SWA 1370, Entwurf der EntschlieÙung zum Genossenschaftstag am 26./27. Aug. 49, 5.

⁵⁴⁴ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 62.

⁵⁴⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 10.

administration of people, goods, and so on. Finally, participation in the co-operative is one way in which people can be included in and come to understand the newly established administrative machinery.⁵⁴⁶

These educational programs had to convince farmers, youth, and women of the advantages of co-operative practices.⁵⁴⁷ In Saxony, in May 1946, the *Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik* (Department of Economic Policy) ordered the consumer co-operatives to establish a single, large, antifascist school. In this school, thirty functionaries were required to take a comprehensive, multi-week course dealing with the problems of the co-operative movement. During this course, the functionaries covered a number of specialized fields.⁵⁴⁸

In late 1949, the SED and the administration of the *Konsum* believed that co-operative functionaries had lost their practical experience and the co-operative movement had become foreign to the younger generation during the Nazi dictatorship. As a result, there were scarcely any educated and trained co-operative functionaries and staff. To remedy this situation, the SED and the *Konsum* established a three-tiered educational structure, as well as guidelines and a curriculum for each level in the system.⁵⁴⁹

In the lowest tier, the *Grundschulen* (co-operative basic schools) were responsible for the training of the personnel in the co-operative stores, consisting primarily of women. The SED wanted the *Grundschulen* to be the connecting link between the administration and the members; hence, they had to pay particular attention to the education and training of the *Konsum* personnel

⁵⁴⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Protokoll über die Konferenz der Konsum-Genossenschaftsverbände in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone in Schwerin/Meckl. Am Donnerstag, dem 5. Juni und Freitag, dem 6. Juni 1947, 35.

⁵⁴⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 11.

⁵⁴⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/17, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Bericht über die Arbeit des Konsumgenossenschaftsverbandes der Provinz Sachsen in Mai 1946 der Abtlg. Konsumgenossenschaften, 19.

⁵⁴⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Richtlinien für die genossenschaftliche Schulungsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, beschlossen auf der Beiratssitzung am 11.-12.9.1947., 21.

along party-approved lines. The instructors, as ministerial documents show, needed to have an influence on the students and trainees which ensured their support for the “democratic centralization” of the co-operative system.⁵⁵⁰ Additionally, the trainees were required to attain a professional education, which would enable them to successfully complete their duties in the co-operative trade.⁵⁵¹ These *Grundschulen* were also used to politically educate co-operative employees and create reserves of educated functionaries.⁵⁵²

The propaganda and ideological component of *Konsum* education becomes evident when the curriculum of the *Grundschulen* is examined in detail. The *Grundschulen* implemented course work on the development of a *menschlich* (civilized/humane) society, including the various societal formations and the concepts of class struggle as the driving force of societal development. Since the emerging society in the SBZ was becoming effectively sovietized (i.e., adopting the political and economic institutions of the Soviet Union), this study of *menschlich* society was almost certainly based on the model of the Soviet Union. Other political components included sections on fascism and the overcoming of Nazi ideology. The creation and development of the consumer co-operatives was the fifth module of the course; as such, it may be construed as less important than the political facets of the training. This module was followed by a section entitled: *The Status of Women in the Past, Present, and Future and their*

⁵⁵⁰ As was discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the East German state was governed through a system of ‘Democratic Centralism’ in which political structures were – like most associations – organized on the basis of hierarchy with power concentrated at the top. However, ‘Democratic Centralism’ (a term adopted by Lenin and common currency throughout the Communist era) meant that open discussion was only possible until a higher party organ reached a decision. At this point, the decision was binding and all lower party organs and society were forced to implement it without question.

⁵⁵¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Richtlinien für die genossenschaftliche Schulungsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, beschlossen auf der Beiratssitzung am 11.-12.9.1947., 22.

⁵⁵² SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 5.

*Significance and Importance in fulfilling the Duties of the Consumer Co-operatives.*⁵⁵³ The development of ideologically oriented and trained employees was the goal of all *Konsum* elementary schools; hence, the party believed that special courses for party functionaries of the consumer co-operatives were of significant importance.⁵⁵⁴

The primary task of the *Mittelschulen* (co-operative middle schools) was the training and education of qualified functionaries and workers, as well as the administration of the co-operative stores, propaganda leaders, and inspectors. According to the document *Guidelines for the Co-operative Schools*, the *Mittelschulen* trained the majority of the leading co-operative functionaries. In addition to their co-operative and specialist education, these functionaries undertook a thorough political component during their training. For example, the students were required to understand the most important aspects of contemporary politics and the issues of the day, as well as grasp the materialist (i.e., Marxist) worldview so as to apply political judgments in any given situation.⁵⁵⁵ Specifically, the curriculum in the *Mittelschulen* comprised five political components based on Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy; it was also permeated with elements of de-Nazification. Although the remaining three components dealt directly with co-operatives, they, too, placed co-operatives into this worldview.⁵⁵⁶

The co-operative *Hochschulen* (university or college of higher education) was responsible for training the instructors in the *Mittelschulen* and the highly qualified co-operative functionaries, especially young professionals. In these schools, the objective was to help these functionaries develop a communist worldview. The training of the middle school instructors

⁵⁵³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Richtlinien für die genossenschaftliche Schulungsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, beschlossen auf der Beiratssitzung am 11.-12.9.1947., 23.

⁵⁵⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Bericht: Über die Zonenkonferenz der Konsumgenossenschaften in Berlin am 14.9.1948, 129.

⁵⁵⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, 11.-12.9.1947., 23.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 25.

took place over a period of six months. The course structure itself was similar to that of the middle schools, but it contained additional advanced components in the history of the German workers' movement, and German history in general, particularly the Reformation, the Thirty Years' War, and the period from the Revolution of 1848 to the First World War. For the co-operative *Hochschulen*, only highly qualified candidates were selected.⁵⁵⁷ The structure of this curriculum conveyed a Marxist-Leninist paradigm. Even within the various historical subcomponents, the main themes repeatedly referred to the notion of class struggle, as well as to the teachings of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.

A document from the Central Committee of the SED indicates that in the regional, district, and party schools, seminars about the consumer co-operatives were incorporated into the course work. This document states, "Because the *Konsum* had become an important mass-organization, it is, therefore, necessary that all party functionaries come to understand the importance of this mass-organization through these courses."⁵⁵⁸ This quotation signifies the subordination of the once independent and thriving German co-operative movement to the educational role of a Soviet-style mass-organization.⁵⁵⁹

The network of co-operative schools continued to expand during the Soviet occupation. As of 13 August 1947, there were functioning co-operative schools in Gelsenau/Erzgebirge, Allstadt in Saxony-Anhalt, Saackrow, Wilhelmshorst, Schwerin, and Oberhof. In Gelsenau, courses were offered in accounting, auditing, and bookkeeping. In Allstadt, six courses dealt

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Abteilung: Genossenschaftswesen, Bericht von Karl Draeger, 15.Juni.1948, 27.

⁵⁵⁹ Co-op education in Western countries often embodies a modest counter cultural character. This was not so in the DDR; rather, *Konsum* education was populist in nature. *Konsum* education, in other words, was mainstream in the DDR.

respectively with propaganda, auditing, transport, accounting, women, and secretaries.⁵⁶⁰ There was a district party school (*Kreispartieschule*) in Neustrelitz for consumer co-operative functionaries and SED members.⁵⁶¹ By 1949, there were additional *Konsum* schools in Kühlungsborn, Spremberg, Wilhelmshorst, and Letzlingen.⁵⁶² In Blankenburg, there was the *Konsum* Technical College for Domestic Trade (*Fachschule für Binnenhandel*). At any given time, there were approximately 200 young *Konsum* workers (consisting mostly of women) taking a three-year administrative course. These women were trained to take responsibility for administrative duties within the *Konsum* (see image on page following). Members of the executive were trained at an educational centre in Cotta bei Pirna where they took courses that lasted several weeks. As discussed in the previous chapter, at the international school in Dresden, co-operators from all over the world were trained, particularly those from African countries.⁵⁶³

In Weimar, the Dorotheenhof served as an educational centre for the *Konsum* for over forty years. There, the first course opened on 8 August 1949 and was attended by young saleswomen. On top of the practical education, political-ideological training was emphasized. Weimar also served as a centre for training special cadres in the field of socialist economics, as well as quality control inspectors, price inspectors, ledgers and members of the administration (*Vorstandsmitglieder*).⁵⁶⁴ None of these schools survived the demise of the East German state.⁵⁶⁵ Nevertheless, an anonymous interviewee indicated that *Konsum* education was generally useful for employees, particularly the three-year economics course undertaken at the College for

⁵⁶⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee, Sekretariat Paul Merker, Bericht über die zurzeit vorhandenen Genossenschaftsschulen, Berlin, 13 August 1947, 141.

⁵⁶¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/116, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Referat in Neustrelitz (Kreispartieschule), Berlin, 6. April 1948, 24.

⁵⁶² Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 138.

⁵⁶³ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 49.

⁵⁶⁴ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 138.

⁵⁶⁵ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 49.

Domestic Trade in Blankenburg (Harz). In fact, this degree program continues to be recognized to this day.⁵⁶⁶ Dr. Burchard Bösche (a West German executive employed in the Hamburg based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*) indicated that practical *Konsum* training was beneficial for employees. According to him, “*Konsum* personnel were often better-qualified than their counterparts in capitalist, West German retail.”⁵⁶⁷



Illustration 22: The Dorotheenhof in Weimar⁵⁶⁸

The co-operative schools may also have played a wider role in communities and the socialist transformation of village culture. Since they underwent ideological training, the teachers in the schools were, at least outwardly, uniformly socialist and they made every effort to transform local cultural life.⁵⁶⁹ Though not directly referring to *Konsum* teachers, historian Jan Palmowski states, “all teachers participated in ideological training events, while at election times or at harvest time, the school and its pupils campaigned publicly on behalf of state and party.”⁵⁷⁰

It is difficult to determine the actual amount of resources that the *Konsum* was willing to allocate to its educational network, yet archival sources indicate that the party devoted some of

⁵⁶⁶ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁵⁶⁷ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, 26 July 2011.

⁵⁶⁸ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 139. The Dorotheenhof remained an education centre until the mid-1990s, when it was then refurbished and re-opened as a hotel. It, has, however, remained completely under the ownership of the Konsumverband. Ibid., 144.

⁵⁶⁹ Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*: 263.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid., 287.

its limited resources to the provision of education. The following quotation demonstrates that the *Konsum* was prepared to heavily invest in these schools:

At the last council meeting on the 18th and 19th of June 1948, Comrade Lucht [future president of the VDK], as an executive of Berlin's *Konsum-Haupt-Sekretariat* gave the Advisory Council the suggestion to establish a co-operative college in Gütersfelde palace in Teltow. After careful estimates, the renovation of the palace will cost approximately one million Reichsmark. The construction of the college was meant to help alleviate personnel problems within the *Konsum-Haupt-Sekretariat* and the *Verbandsleitung*.⁵⁷¹

The report underscores that all party schools had to include co-operative themes in order to emphasize the importance of the *Konsum* as a mass-organization and its role in training co-operative functionaries.⁵⁷²

The party members in the executive of the VDK recognized the value of education for leading functionaries in their development of class-consciousness.⁵⁷³ The politicized education of students continued until the 1950s. During this decade, *Konsum* employees received a highly politicized reading list, which included Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*; *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*; and *Marxism and the Question of Nationalism*. As well, students also read the *Collected Works of Lenin: Volumes 1 and 2*, Friedrich Engels's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, and Marx's and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*.⁵⁷⁴

Between 1950 and 1965, the number of sales positions in the *Konsum* rose from approximately 14,000 to over 38,000. During this fifteen-year timeframe, seven new workers joined the *Konsum*'s workforce per day. This exponential growth caused problems, however, as many unqualified personnel were hired. While seventy-five percent of the *Konsum* employees

⁵⁷¹ SAPMO: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Bericht: Betr. Hochschule der Konsumgenossenschaften. Berlin, 22. Juni 1948, geschrieben von Kurt Draeger, 142.

⁵⁷² Ibid.

⁵⁷³ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given), 12.

⁵⁷⁴ SWA: V8/2043, Literaturverzeichnis, Leipzig, den 13. April 1954, 2.

had received some sales training by 1959, the quality of the personnel remained a systemic obstruction.⁵⁷⁵ For this reason, in his article from the 1958 *Konsum* publication *Blick vorwärts*, Dr. Willi Köppert stressed that “a way needed to be found that would provide functionaries of the *Dorf-Konsumgenossenschaften* (rural consumer co-operatives) with the opportunity to visit co-operative schools.”⁵⁷⁶

On account of this exponential growth, there was a rapid rise in student enrolment in the *Konsum* schools in the late 1950s. In 1959, 15,000 trainees were taking part in some sort of instruction within the network of schools. The majority were being trained to work as sales staff in the retail outlets. Among these 15,000, many were prepared for work in the production factories. Some were also taught at the *Zentralen Schule des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften* (Central School of the Union of Consumer Co-operatives), where they took a six-month course for leading functionaries of the *Konsum*.⁵⁷⁷ However, the majority of the 15,000 *Konsum* employees received only practical training. For instance, *Konsum* sales personnel had to take weekly informational seminars regarding supply situations and delivery schedules. Every single salesperson was trained and expected to be able to answer flawlessly supply questions for the clientele.⁵⁷⁸

6.1.1. Becoming propagandists

The *Konsum* employee was trained to be the connecting link between the customer and the party.⁵⁷⁹ For this reason, every worker and functionary of the *Konsum* was required to deepen his or her political knowledge and ideological understanding of the latest political

⁵⁷⁵ Ludwig, "Nicht mehr verteilen -- sondern verkaufen," 36.

⁵⁷⁶ Köppert, "Ein Kampfprogramm zur weiteren Festigung des Bündnisses der Arbeiterklasse mit der werktätigen Bauernschaft," 53.

⁵⁷⁷ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 36.

⁵⁷⁸ SWA: U2/SWA 1594, Verkaufsstelle der ausgezeichneten Verkaufskultur (Date not given - probably the 1950s or early 1960s), 9.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

developments.⁵⁸⁰ The *Konsum* believed that the increased political astuteness of its employees would lead to improvements in retail trade. By becoming informational and ideological conduits and transmission-belts to consumers and members, *Konsum* employees became an important junction between party and consumer. Hypothetically, employees became political functionaries, propagandists, and educators.⁵⁸¹

The *Konsum* further politicized education by establishing a propaganda department in every co-operative. The primary undertaking of the propaganda department was to bring about the development of antifascist, co-operative, and political life.⁵⁸² The directors of the propaganda departments in the consumer co-operatives were responsible for numerous political initiatives, which included the construction of members' departments according to their sex and professional grouping (i.e., female workers, female farmers, and housewives). This also meant the employment of a full-time female position for planning the establishment of educational and women's groups.⁵⁸³ Given that the same person or group of people were often responsible for agitation, training, and advertising, we can conclude that lines between the three were blurred and in many ways were one and the same.

There were special courses for training new functionaries and SED members working within the *Konsum*. One such course lasted for eight days, dealing with a different theme each day. Day 1 focused on the role of the party in the co-operatives; Day 2 discussed the development of co-operatives in England, Germany, and the USSR; Day 3 examined the importance of co-operatives in the workers' movement; Day 4 reviewed the current tasks of the

⁵⁸⁰ SWA: V8/2043, KGV Bezirk Dresden Abteilung Kader/Schulung, Dresden, den 11. Dezember, 1954.

⁵⁸¹ SWA: V8/2010, Befähigungsnachweis zur Leitung einer Vst bzw. Gst des sozialist. Handels, Berlin den 28. November 1960, 363.

⁵⁸² SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Diskussionsgrundlage zu Punkt 2) der Tagesordnung für die Beiratssitzung des Konsum – Hauptsekretariats am 11. Und 12. September 1947 in Kühlungsborn: Berlin, den 15. September 1947, 26.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., 28-29.

co-operatives; Day 5 examined co-operatives and the middle classes with a focus on monopoly capitalism; Day 6 instilled economic planning and co-operative distribution practices; Day 7 considered the party's political objectives in the co-operatives; and Day 8 concluded with questions related to co-operative practice.⁵⁸⁴ Not only were *Konsum* employees expected to be well versed in these subject areas, but they were also expected to relay this party-approved knowledge to customers through a socialist consumer culture, which infused consumption with socialist ideology. Trade guides, for instance, attempted to raise socialist consciousness amongst store personnel, who then had to act as conduits of this information to their customers. Because the act of consumption involved direct contact between the East German population and the state-directed economy, the SED clearly recognized the potential for co-operatives to promulgate specific types of ideological discourse to consumers through various means: advertising, shop window displays (see Chapter 7), and consumers' contact with consultants and sales assistants to educate them about the links between socialism, modernity, and the abundance of commodities. Historian Katherine Pence argues that "unlike profit-driven capitalist advertising, this consumer propaganda aimed to educate the shopper about the availability of commodities, questions of taste and also the connection between material culture and the politics of socialism."⁵⁸⁵

Salespeople, for their part, had to be well informed about the correct use of available consumer products and were trained to carry on conversations about contemporary politics with customers. Pence further states that "it was not only important for store clerks to be able to answer questions about the correct use of products, but also to get involved in conversations about the meaning of the [*Konsum*] stores, about the new refugee population, or the new Oder-

⁵⁸⁴ SWA: U2/SWA 1245, SCHULUNGSPLAN für Genossenschaftsfunktionäre der SED (date not given).

⁵⁸⁵ Pence, "You as a Woman Will Understand," 224-25.

Neiße border between East Germany and Poland.”⁵⁸⁶ Generally, *Konsum* salespeople were required to take twelve days of political instruction which dealt with subjects ranging from “the history of human society, the condition of exploitation, the state and democracy, the National Front, the history of consumer co-operatives, the Marshall Plan, the Two-Year Plan, the stores and functionary work, the trade unions, and others.”⁵⁸⁷ As this course load indicates, education was used to teach saleswomen to teach customers to equate consumer abundance with the SED’s political and economic policies.⁵⁸⁸

There were *Konsum* schools, as was the case in Saaleck, which dealt primarily with political education, where students took courses on cadre and functionary training.⁵⁸⁹ Frau S. took a course on ideological work (*massenpolitische Arbeit*) from 14 September 1954 to 14 December 1954 at Saaleck. According to her evaluation, when she came to the school she had only trivial theoretical knowledge. However, as the course progressed, she was able to draw a number of conclusions regarding the application of theory to daily work (*in der Praxis*). Still, Frau S. had difficulty relating to her classmates who had lesser ability and knowledge. She was simply unable to educate her classmates and gain their trust, which was one of the most essential aspects of being a functionary. In spite of these faults, the Saaleck instructors believed she would still make a fine functionary, propagandist, and educator.⁵⁹⁰

During the 1950s and 1960s, the VDK and the Stasi took the ideological training of the *Konsum* workforce very seriously. According to an internal Stasi document, “the *Konsum* retail outlets were to be portrayed as a focal point in the struggle for peace. At these outlets, our

⁵⁸⁶ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 428.

⁵⁸⁷ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand,'" 224-25.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ SWA: V8/2043, Schule: Pol. Massenarbeit/Kader/Schulung, Leipzig, den 9.8.1954.

⁵⁹⁰ SWA: V8/2043, Beurteilung der Kollegin S, VDK-Warenhaus Leipzig, geb. am 27.12.1908 für die Zeit des III. Lehrganges für massenpolitische Arbeit an der KG-Schule Saaleck vom 14.9.54 – 14.12.1954.

customers' current discussions about political questions had to be properly dealt with in order to enable them to struggle for peace."⁵⁹¹ Moreover, there is evidence that the Stasi was measuring the ideological influence of *Konsum* workers on consumers. It was estimated that ideological work was weakly developed and inadequate at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Mitte* in 1960. The Stasi was alarmed that ideological work was considered less important than the concerns of daily work within this outlet. More worrisome from the Stasi perspective, as the report also indicated, a very weak female comrade (*Genossin*) was elected to the administration of this Berlin co-operative. She was reprimanded for not improving the ideological work of the party. Consequently, the Stasi believed this retail outlet was failing to influence its workers and customers ideologically, and so the Stasi recommend increased ideological training for the *Konsum* workforce.⁵⁹² For instance, in order to have a current view on contemporary political events, sales personnel had to arrive at work fifteen minutes early to discuss newspaper articles and questions about collective living under socialism. The primary reason for these meetings was to enable the sales-personnel to act as a junction between the party and the consumers.⁵⁹³

The *Konsum*'s propaganda and agitation departments believed that the *Verkaufsgespräch* (sales talk or sales pitch) was a critical component of propaganda work in the retail outlets. The SED and the *Konsum* clearly understood that millions of people frequented these stores every day. As stated in *Monatsschrift Grundsätzliche Fragen*, a *Konsum* publication from 1952, "the workers in the retail outlets have ample opportunity to explain the politics of our government during the sale of goods. They have close contact with members and customers and could transform our retail outlets into centres of enlightenment and information hotspots

⁵⁹¹ SWA: U2/SWA 1594, Verkaufsstelle der ausgezeichneten Verkaufskultur (Date not given - probably the 1950s or early 1960s), 6.

⁵⁹² BStU - MfS Zentralarchiv 2493/67, Analyse Konsumgenossenschaft - Mitte, Berlin den 8.11.1960, 34.

⁵⁹³ SWA: U2/SWA 1594, Verkaufsstelle der ausgezeichneten Verkaufskultur (Date not given - probably the 1950s or early 1960s), 9.

(*Aufklärungszentren*).⁵⁹⁴ Therefore, sales personnel were trained to design political displays and to point out to customers the successes of the socialist economic system, as well as the great advantages of their peaceful relations with the Soviet Union. They also had to explain the consequences of the division of Germany and convince customers that they had to assist in overcoming the tribulations of the Cold War. Rather than making long speeches, sales personnel were taught to deliver these messages in a few “punchy” and direct sentences to maximize their impact on consumers and members. Here is what the *Konsum*’s propaganda department had to say about the *Verkaufsgespräch* in a 1960s document entitled *Guidelines for Agitation Work in the Consumer Co-operative*:

The *Verkaufsgespräch* will help us to help the population develop the necessary and proper modes of argumentation and draw the proper conclusions, which will enable them to improve their own work. Moreover, a well-conducted *Verkaufsgespräch* enhances our ability to recruit new members for our consumer co-operatives.⁵⁹⁵

As depicted in Illustration 23, during national political events and anniversaries, employees of the *Konsum* were trained and expected to enhance the political quality of displays and the ideological impact of their conversations with customers.⁵⁹⁶

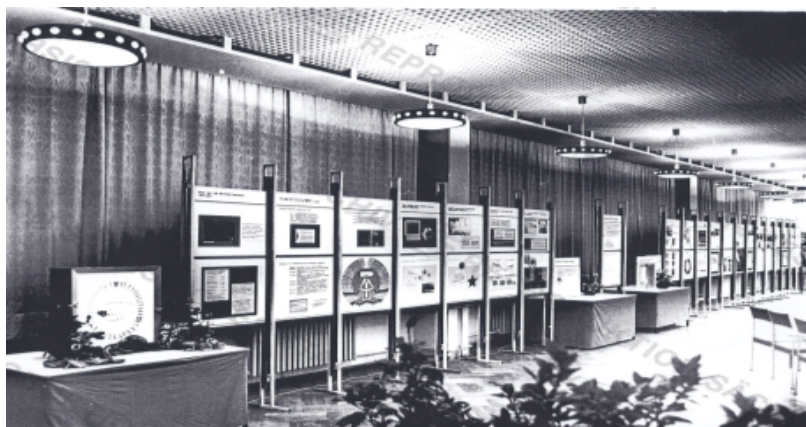


Illustration 23: The *Konsum* portraying the chronology of the DDR (Date not given)
The *Konsum* often acted as an informational and educational junction between party and customer⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁴ Marga Buckhard, "AKB: Über die Verbesserung der Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften," in *Monatsschrift Grundsätzlich Fragen* (Berlin: VDK, 1952), 45.

⁵⁹⁵ SWA: U2/I/58, 1952, 8.

⁵⁹⁶ SWA: U2/(SWA 2532) I/336, den 27.3.1965.

6.2. Women and education

Following the founding of the SED in April 1946, the party came to the conclusion that women were lacking political knowledge, especially in the area of ideological theory. For that reason, the SED became especially interested in the intensive education of women, particularly in the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism.⁵⁹⁸ According to the precepts of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the SED was compelled to include women in its socialist experiment. Of course, the other and more pressing reason for the SED appeals to women was because of male wartime deaths and the resulting distortion of the postwar demographic. This meant female inclusion in political and ideological indoctrination in the *Konsum*'s network of educational facilities was also based on pressure of circumstance. What is more, not to include women in education, the SED ideologues believed, would imply that the victory of socialism was not possible.⁵⁹⁹ The *Konsum*, therefore, took considerable measures to actively encourage women to participate in education. As is continually stated in archival sources, the *Konsum* also firmly believed that having women participate in its educational courses would lead to female equality.⁶⁰⁰ Additionally, the party sought to mobilize women for political tasks; first, however, women needed to achieve an adequate level of ideological awareness in order to participate in politics.⁶⁰¹

The co-operatives were to become elementary schools for the political education of women. In the words of Politburo Member Helmut Lehmann:

We had to manage the motherly instinct of women, because women's motivation arose from their instinctual interest in their families. The socialist transformation and plan for our community was, therefore, still alien to women. Women today were called to fight

⁵⁹⁷ SSC: 30878/425, (Date not given).

⁵⁹⁸ Gabriele Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR* (Dusseldorf Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1973), 69.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

⁶⁰⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1656, Die nächsten Aufgaben der Konsumgenossenschaften, Dresden, den 25. Juli 1949, 8.

⁶⁰¹ Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR*: 19-20.

for the interests of the entire population; therefore, they had to first be educated in political collaboration. The co-operative was capable of reaching women as a consumer, as a purchaser of goods, and as the caregiver of the family. Moreover, the consumer co-operative had to make clear to women that all the consumer goods they purchased were above all political products [produced by the state for private consumption and for use in the private sphere]. The co-operatives had to educate women to think not solely of the family, but also the general public. In these respects, the consumer co-operatives were given a great responsibility.⁶⁰²

This quotation encapsulates the SED's contradictory definition of female emancipation and the role the *Konsum* was to play in the reorganization of postwar gender roles in East Germany. Lehman's words indicate that the *Konsum* had to educate women politically and draw them into wage labour, as well as suggest that the *Konsum*'s focus on women was for quite traditional reasons, especially the notion that women were the family shoppers and were naturally inclined to be interested in consumption.

The SED's educational policies were especially directed at women – that is, they created a situation where women were able to take the necessary training courses in order to ensure that they were qualified for participation in the *Konsum*'s internal governance and party politics. Throughout the 1940s, the steady rise in the number of women enrolled in these courses was perhaps indicative of increased gender equality and modernity within the totalitarian structures of the SED régime.⁶⁰³ As an illustration of this point, Anne Wolter was appointed to the position of lecturer (*Referentin*) in the co-operative school in Gelenau (located in the Erzgebirge in Saxony) on 14 July 1947. The courses that she taught lasted three weeks. To translate her words, “of the

⁶⁰² SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Protokoll über die Konferenz der Konsum-Genossenschaftsverbände in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone in Schwerin/Meckl. Am Donnerstag, dem 5. Juni und Freitag, dem 6. Juni 1947, 35.

⁶⁰³ Barbara Bertram, ">>Nicht zurück an den Kochtopf<< -- Aus- und Weiterbildung in Ostdeutschland " in *Frauen in Deutschland 1945-1992*, ed. Gisela Helwig and Hildegard Maria Nickel (Bonn Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 1993), 196.

twenty-four registered participants, nine were women. In addition to their work in the co-operatives, these women were also first-rate functionaries of the party.”⁶⁰⁴

The *Konsum* developed educational plans and courses for women (*Frauenförderungspläne*), which were to prepare them for their new administrative and ideological roles.⁶⁰⁵ For instance, the *Konsum* offered an eight-day-course, with each individual day dealing with a different theme. Day 1 dealt with the history of the German workers’ movement (from its beginnings in 1836 to the present); Day 2 focused on the development of the women’s movement and its role in the history of the workers’ movement (from 1891 to the present); Day 3 investigated the struggle against Nazi-ideology, with a focus on the question of race and *Lebensraum* (a Nazified term referring to the conquest of living space); Day 4 dealt with the history of the co-operative movement in England, Germany, and the USSR; Day 5 reviewed the role of women in the co-operative and its connection with communal women’s committees; Day 6 studied general economic questions; Day 7 examined economic planning and co-operative distribution; and Day 8 considered ways in which practical women’s work (organization, agitation, recruitment, and propaganda) could be implemented in the workplace.⁶⁰⁶ These courses were intended to provide women with the necessary skill sets for their ideologically driven gender roles in societal, state, and economic life. Interestingly, family life was not included.⁶⁰⁷ Still, as the state developed, women maintained their traditional role as the caretaker of the family.

⁶⁰⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Bericht von Anne Wolter, 24.7.47, 139-40.

⁶⁰⁵ SWA: U2/(SWA 538) 757, Frauenförderungsplan der Konsum-Genossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, Exact date not given though reference is made to 1954, 2-5.

⁶⁰⁶ SWA: U2/SWA 1245, SCHULUNGSPLAN für den Frauen-Kursus, date not given.

⁶⁰⁷ SWA: U2/(SWA 538) 757, 2-5.

Education became an avenue for female promotion. VDK President Margarete Wittowski (1951 to 1954) stands as proof that women were able to reach the upper echelons of power within the *Konsum*. Although their numbers in these top-managerial or decision-making positions were fewer than those of men, women were, metaphorically speaking, able to break through the glass ceiling; thus, of the approximately 30,000 elected *Konsum* representatives in 1949, fifty percent were women, although their number in the top administrative positions was only around twenty-five percent.⁶⁰⁸ Nevertheless, female participation was high. One can, therefore, conclude that women and East German gender roles were fundamentally changed by the experience of education in the SED dictatorship. Indeed, women's lives, previously limited to the family, were broadened by their opportunity to work and to receive various educational opportunities. However, as an educator, the *Konsum* gave contradictory messages to women, since they had to reconcile the ideological imperative to become educated workers while maintaining their traditional role as caretaker of the family. This contradictory message is not limited to *Konsum* education but it is an inescapable aspect of changing gender roles in capitalist cultures and societies as well. However, in the DDR the differences lie in the level of state encouragement both financially and educationally for women to participate in wage labour and politics. In point of fact, *Konsum* schools supported women in their role as educated and employed mothers by allowing them to bring their children to school with them.⁶⁰⁹

Female education coincided with the state and the *Konsum*'s attempt to establish gender equality and modernity. The SED's vision of equality and modernity was the inclusion of women in waged labour and education. According to Madarász, different segments of society reacted differently to these policies. Women, for instance, may have felt more loyal to the

⁶⁰⁸ Schwenger, "Konsumgenossenschaften," 774.

⁶⁰⁹ SWA: V8/2017, Beschlüsse-Anweisungen-Informationen des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Berlin den 2. Oktober 1964, 194.

régime than youth. In light of these sorts of reactions, the attitudinal and behavioural impact of the régime's educational politics on the East German population should not be underestimated, especially with women.⁶¹⁰ By looking at women with regard to their place in education, certain conclusions can be teased out in respect to their indoctrination into the SED's ideology. In the words of historian Angela Brock, "despite the high demands made of them by societal life, women generally responded more positively to political demands and the realities of life than men: a more pronounced pride in the DDR, acceptance of the leading role of the SED, a better relation to the Soviet Union, and a better attitude to the FDJ and societal involvement." She continues, "In this respect, the state's endeavours to improve women's societal standing by means of legislation and material help, most notably in the form of free education, bore fruit in ensuring women's loyalty. The first generation of women who had been socialized solely under socialist conditions had internalized new mindsets and attitudes by the late 1960s."⁶¹¹

6.3. Disciplinary institutions – evaluations and character assessments

Students in the *Konsum* schools had to undergo character, behavioural, heritage (parentage or class background, for example), and technical assessments as a prerequisite for advancement – that is, demonstrating the right "personal traits" was equally as important as actual performance in courses for consideration for promotion. Herr W., for instance, demonstrated an open and honest character throughout a course taken in 1956. His behaviour in the collective was deemed satisfactory. Also, his seminar work was very positive and he made solid contributions to discussions. He received a 2.0 (the equivalent of a B+) for his work in the

⁶¹⁰ Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany*: 92.

⁶¹¹ Angela Brock, "Producing the 'Socialist Personality'? Socialisation, Education, and the Emergence of New Patterns of Behaviour," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalisation of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 246.

social sciences.⁶¹² Frau U. was criticized for not taking course material seriously. Nevertheless, she was still praised for her impeccable behaviour throughout the course. The social heritage or class background of the student was also provided on their evaluations. In the case of Frau U., she came from a working-class background.⁶¹³ The *Konsum* School for Finance and Accounting suggested that Sonja W. receive further training as an accountant on the basis of her positive character evaluation (bright, helpful, honest) and an overall positive evaluation, along with a grade of 2.0 which enabled her to receive further training in accounting.⁶¹⁴ Frau M., on the other hand, received a negative overall evaluation. Consequently, she had to leave her position and take further courses on political economy.⁶¹⁵ These evaluations showed that performance in the schools was critical to both maintaining a job and being considered for further training and promotion. In speaking about similar methods of control in the Soviet Union, historian Stephen Kotkin suggests, “a far more subtle and in the end no less effective method of coercion was at hand: the ability to define who people were.”⁶¹⁶ Furthermore, these evaluations demonstrate a key totalitarian characteristic of the régime, namely defining the identity of an individual in language that was reflective and drawn from the lexicon of the ruling ideology. By extension, the *Konsum* was playing such a role by determining the working class heritage of its students and evaluating how they functioned within the collective. Consequently, the *Konsum* had immense power and leverage over students’ life opportunities and was helping turn students into subjects.

Those wanting to participate in a *Konsum* course had to present the school with a short biography of themselves (a very typical practice in the DDR) and a certificate of health four

⁶¹² SWA: V8/2043, Beurteilung, der Koll. W., Leipzig, am 6.1.1956.

⁶¹³ SWA: V8/2043, Beurteilung der Kollegin U., geb. 25.2.1935, für die Zeit des Lehrgages für massenpol. Arbeit, Schulungsstufe II, in Saaleck vom 4.5. bis 4.8.1954.

⁶¹⁴ SWA: V8/2043, 2. Lehrgang 1955, Beurteilung, KGV-Bezirk-Leipzig-Schule Finanzen Rechnungswesen, Leipzig C1, Käthe-Kollwitz-Str. 54.

⁶¹⁵ SWA: V8/2043, Beurteilung, die Koll. M., Leipzig, am 6.1.1956.

⁶¹⁶ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*: 224.

weeks before the beginning of the course. The *Konsum* school administrator took these biographies, along with the school's capacity, into consideration before permitting admittance.⁶¹⁷ Needless to say, having the proper education and character assessment was a necessary component for men as well as women to advance into the upper levels of management in the *Konsum*. In a 2004 interview, Manfred Reimann, the chairman of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Kries-Wurzen*, explained that:

Following a completed business course in 1949, I took a job at the consumer co-operative in *Kreis Döbeln*. At the time, I was nineteen, and the course of my life was always impacted by my attendance at the co-operative schools and the qualifications that I received there. In 1953, I attended the *Konsum* Middle School for Accounting in Plau am See. Thereafter, I began work as an internal accountant for the *Kreisverband* (co-operative regional association) in Döbeln; I also began to take over responsibility for financial auditing in the *Konsumgenossenschaftsverbandes-Bezirk-Leipzig*. During this time, I took a correspondence course at the Financial Technical College so that I could become an auditor. My successful work as a financial accountant since 1956 gave the *Vorstand* of the regional administration a reason to offer me a job as the chief auditor in the *Konsum-Kreisverband Wurzen* from 1960-61.⁶¹⁸

In addition to the ideological components of this training, women in the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* were given practical training so as to take top managerial positions, including executive positions (*Vorstandsmitglieder*) and managers (*Leiter*). In 1954, there were 348 women taking specialist courses in co-operative schools. Following these courses, women were placed into the positions for which they trained. For instance, Frau W. was qualified for a position on the executive after a training course in trade and functionary work. Frau M. had to take a course on social politics due to her important position in the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig*.⁶¹⁹ In fact, *Konsum* education has been described as effective by those interviewed for this dissertation. Specifically, in an interview with Martin Bergner, the current spokesman for

⁶¹⁷ SWA: V8/2209 Beschlüsse-Anweisungen-Informationen des Verbandes Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, - Lehrgänge an den konsumgenossenschaftlichen Schulen im Jahre 1963, Berlin, den 7. September 1962, 128.

⁶¹⁸ Bösche, "7.2. Interview with Manfred Reimann and Martin Tänzer," 76.

⁶¹⁹ SWA: U2/(SWA 538) 757, 1954, 2-5.

the *Zentralkonsum*, he described his educational experiences and his years spent in *Konsum* education during which he was trained in production, computer literacy, and languages as “positive.” He states “the *Konsum* offered an excellent form of co-operative education and continuing education (*Weiterbildung*) for employees. *Konsum* education was also helpful in securing a promotion.”⁶²⁰

6.4. Conclusions

Educational processes required that students be subjected to socialist ideology and relations of power. It is for this reason that the *Konsum* functioned as an Ideological State Apparatus by exposing students to the ideas, the language, worldview, organizational structure, and symbols of the SED. And, similar to those at most educational institutions, co-operative students had to undergo a form of socialisation during their educational course work.⁶²¹ Ultimately, in the process of teaching, the *Konsum* provided instruction in obedience, deference, the virtues of socialism, the language and state-narrative of East German socialism, and ways to pass all of this on to *Konsum* customers and members. In short, as the character evaluations demonstrated, this educational network inculcated discipline and self-discipline and encouraged the *Konsum*’s workers and employees – particularly women – to establish, promote, and maintain the socialist system in order to attain career advancement. Still, women were a relatively invested and loyal segment of the population.⁶²² To speculate, women may have entered into a sort of hidden agreement with the régime (i.e., the opportunity for education and perhaps career advancement in return for the outward appearance of loyalty). The theme of female participation will continue to be discussed in Chapter 9. In the meantime, the following

⁶²⁰ Author’s interview with Martin Bergner, Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

⁶²¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, I: 95.

⁶²² Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany*: 92.

chapter continues with the subject of education and the ways in which it was juxtaposed with socialist consumer culture.

7. *Konsum* advertising: a junction of propaganda, education, and consumer culture

The *Konsum* absolutely did not play a role in propaganda. It was by no means a propaganda apparatus.

- Martin Bergner (a former *Konsum* employee and economist in the DDR and the current spokesperson for the Berlin based Zentralkonsum – the successor of the VDK)⁶²³

Daily – hundreds of thousands of members and customers come into the *Konsum* retail outlets. These stores connect and explain to members and customers the politics of our government and demonstrate the success of our planned economy.

- Charlotte Aderhold⁶²⁴



Illustration 24: Karl Marx display window in a *Konsum* store, 1953⁶²⁵

⁶²³ Author's interview with Martin Bergner, Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

⁶²⁴ Charlotte Aderhold, "AKB: Die große Bedeutung der Verkaufsstellenausschüsse für die Entwicklung der Konsumgenossenschaften zu einer kämpferisch-demokratischen Massenorganisation," in *Monatsschrift Grundsätzliche Fragen der Konsumgenossenschaften* (Berlin: Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952), 55.

⁶²⁵ AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und politischen Themen - 1953 - Werbe Abteilung Konsumgenossenschaften - Kreis - Oelsnitz.

This chapter examines the ways in which the *Konsum* promulgated the ideology of the SED through politicized consumption. Like the previous, this chapter also explores education and persuasion, albeit in the form of socialist advertising and shop window displays. In the twentieth century, advertising became an important medium for the construction of dream worlds and creation of identities. This was also true in *Konsum* advertising, though in ways unique to the context of a totalitarian state. The DDR condemned freedom to consume as an illusory freedom promoted by capitalism. Thus, the SED attempted to create a socialist consumer culture by eliminating illusion and replacing it with authentic desires and wishes based on the “use value” of objects “over their fantastic, quasi-magical ‘exchange value.’”⁶²⁶ A reference work for DDR advertising highlights the official differences between socialist and capitalist advertising:

Socialist advertising truthfully informs consumers about the real benefits of goods and services without the exaggeration typical of capitalist advertising. It does not manipulate consumers by trying to convince them that a given product offers additional benefits, such as an increase in prestige. Customers are given information intended to facilitate a fact-based purchasing decision. They should not allow themselves to get carried away by emotionally driven impulse purchases that they may later regret.⁶²⁷

Unofficially, the primary aim of DDR advertising was to advertise the system of socialism and its advantages over capitalism through the tangible proof of displays of large assortments of consumer goods. As a result, *Konsum* advertisers were no longer merely selling goods based on their usefulness, but through their association with political and ideological slogans. As will be seen throughout this chapter, the *Konsum* praised the SED through association of the party’s political slogans with in-demand consumer goods. All of this was done to persuade the consumer not only of the increasing prowess of the command economy, but also that life was

⁶²⁶ Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream worlds: mass consumption in late nineteenth-century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 314.

⁶²⁷ Annette Kaminsky, “True Advertising means promoting a good thing through a good form,” in *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Pamela E. Swett, S. Jonathan Wiesen, and Jonathan R. Zatlin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 264-65.

improving because of it. This method of using shop windows with stacks of consumer goods to legitimize the state continued right up until 1989, even though by this time the majority believed that western consumerism was the far better alternative.⁶²⁸

7.1. Propaganda, education, or advertising?

Consumption propaganda, under the guise of advertising, played an explanatory, pedagogical, and persuasive role similar to that of the *Konsum* schools.⁶²⁹ As an educational medium, propaganda in the DDR classified systems of association and contrast. All of this was done for the purpose of reinforcing and explicating the symbolizing systems of the SED-state. This chapter explicates how propaganda was used to inculcate and educate East Germans about the differences between capitalist and socialist consumption and, more broadly, between the two German societies. While this chapter does not directly examine propaganda in the West, it should be noted that DDR propaganda was designed to help its citizens learn to understand the “socialist construction” by contrasting and relating it to an invented version of West Germany and capitalism. Furthermore, propaganda in East Germany was an attempt to signify a break with the past, thanks to SED policies and its command economy. *Konsum* propagandists, in other words, were exploiting many different signifiers by combining SED slogans with desired consumer products.⁶³⁰ At the heart of this definition of propaganda is the idea of mass-persuasion and mass-pacification.

The *Konsum* was given the propaganda role of showcasing socialism by demonstrating the superiority of the new socialist societal system to consumers.⁶³¹ That is clearly indicated in

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 266.

⁶²⁹ Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 135.

⁶³⁰ Belsey, *Poststructuralism*: 7-22.

⁶³¹ Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 164-66.

the 1952 document produced by the *Konsum*'s agitation⁶³² and advertising department entitled *Guidelines for Agitation Work in the Consumer Co-operatives*:

The SED recognized that the *Konsum* – with its 15,000 retail outlets [in 1952] – had the opportunity to conduct propaganda and agitation work for the party on a relentless and daily basis. Given its close proximity with the population, the *Konsum* was in a position to persistently explain the governmental politics to its mass-membership. In so doing, the *Konsum* was directly trying to increase the political consciousness of its members and consumers.⁶³³

The purpose of the above referenced document deserves to be examined in more detail, since it explicates some of the broader ideological and advertising imperatives of the *Konsum*. First and foremost, it demonstrates that the *Konsum* attempted, as is evident in the images throughout this chapter, to combine advertising with agitation for the purposes of educating (*erziehen*) the population. More specifically, the document states that this “education” was to encourage East Germans to “fulfill the Resolutions of the Second Party Congress of the SED, develop and raise the socialist awareness (*Staatsbewusstsein*) of the *Konsum*'s then 2.5 million members, and recognize the importance of friendship with the great Soviet people.”⁶³⁴ Again, the important conclusion to be drawn from this document is that the SED was trying to combine consumerism and advertising with propaganda and ideology in an attempt to persuade East Germans of the superiority of socialism, to legitimize the rule of the SED, to mobilize the population, and to garner their support for further totalitarian experiments in social engineering such as the “building of socialism” in 1952-1953 (Stalinization of East Germany).⁶³⁵ All of this is clearly and succinctly stated in the 1952 document entitled *Guidelines for Agitational Work* and in

⁶³² *Agitation* can be directly translated into English as agitation. While the English use of the word more directly relates to some sort of mental anxiety, the German term is limited to a political context in the sense of political rabble-rousing.

⁶³³ SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 3.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶³⁵ Stalinism, at its most basic, means the centralized, totalitarian pursuit of Communism.

Illustrations 25 to 33, which brings into question the so-called political neutrality that the *Konsum* claimed following the fall of the Berlin Wall (see section 10.2).⁶³⁶

East Germans' dependence on the *Konsum* stores meant that its propaganda was frequently present whenever consumers (mostly women and rural inhabitants) shopped in co-operative sales outlets. Female consumers and rural inhabitants often did not have a choice among the *Konsum*, the other state-owned and operated retail organization (the *Handelsorganisation*, **HO**), or private retailers. For the majority of Germans living in the SBZ, the *Konsum* was the only retail option available to them, particularly in smaller centres and in the countryside.⁶³⁷ Although people's choices were significantly constrained by time, distance, and the policies of the régime regarding which stores were in which places, people did have options and could – except perhaps in the smallest and most remote rural communities – avoid their local *Konsum* if they really wanted to. With that said, however, the only other option available to the vast majority of East Germans was to either, if they had access to Western currency, purchase goods in the hard currency stores (*Intershops*), or to shop in the few remaining private stores. The other more probable option was for the consumer to visit the HO, which had very similar “advertising” campaigns.⁶³⁸ It would have been extremely difficult for the average consumer to avoid completely the propaganda reach of the 50,000 combined *Konsum* and HO stores (my

⁶³⁶ SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 1-3.

⁶³⁷ The state trade organization Handelsorganisation (HO) was network of retail stores established in November 1948. In these stores, East Germans had the opportunity to buy (un)rationed goods, albeit at very high prices. These stores served two purposes: they soaked up additional cash that was circulating in the DDR through piecework and higher wages; and they served as a key advertisement for the régime by displaying concrete proof of the improvements in everyday life and showing off the promise of consumer plenty. The HO chain rapidly expanded and its numbers were largely equal to those of the *Konsum*, with the 25,000 retail outlets and 37 percent of the DDR's retail trade. Swett, Wiesen, and Zatlin, *Selling Modernity*: 285.

⁶³⁸ A broad discussion of the HO falls outside the scope of this dissertation. For more on the HO's advertising and shop windows, See Chapter 9 of Pence, "From Rations to Fashions."

interview with an anonymous school teacher attests to this).⁶³⁹ What is more, and as discussed in section 2.1.10, East Germans could neither legally hold hard currency nor shop in the western currency stores until 1974 (*Intershops*).⁶⁴⁰ Therefore, the consumer had very little choice during the 1950s and 1960s between the *Konsum* and the HO. However, the only retail option that was always open to consumers was the *Konsum* on account of its ubiquity, especially in the countryside, and the affordability of its products. By extension, we can therefore safely conclude that the *Konsum* had extensive reach into East German society. In other words, the *Konsum* was at the heart of the consumption experience in East Germany and was the predominant form of retailing. This meant that its propaganda/advertising, whether effective or not, was always present.

The established co-operatives in rural communities generally did not generate profit; rather, they were subordinate to the party's political objective of the "Building of Socialism." The slogan of the VDK leadership reads as follows: "everywhere and at anytime, the consumer co-operatives guarantee the reliable provision of basic goods for the population."⁶⁴¹ Since there was a *Konsum* store in nearly every town and village, there certainly was some truth behind this slogan. Dr. W. Köppert, a *Konsum* propagandist, argued in a *Konsum* sponsored publication that political duties were of greater importance to the *Konsum* than its respective profitability. In 1955, he declared:

The commercial duties of the consumer co-operatives had an apparent political content that needed to be deepened. This ideological work was intended to have a positive effect on the economic development of the consumer co-operatives. As is generally known, Lenin taught us that the economic result can only be judged by the ideological impact of the enterprise. Accordingly, the primary content of the political work of the consumer

⁶³⁹ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁶⁴⁰ The Intershops were a chain of government-run retail stores in which only hard currencies, such as the U.S. dollar, West German Mark, or British Pound could be used to purchase high-quality goods.

⁶⁴¹ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 28.

co-operatives had to always include clarification of the political fundamentals involved with the “Building of Socialism” in the DDR, as well as West German imperialism.⁶⁴²

With its high membership numbers, the *Konsum* and its propaganda-organs became an especially suitable medium for propaganda purposes.⁶⁴³ Indeed, the SED’s attempt to control the propagandized message of consumption was clearly articulated in a report written to the VDK on December 20, 1957:

The *Konsum* implemented continually stronger measures in order to become a working-class (i.e., political) organization, which would then contribute to the political tasks of the régime during the transformation from capitalism to socialism. The consumer co-operatives were for the party of the working-class – the SED – and they were one of the state’s most important propaganda tools. The aim of co-operative work was to provide political and propaganda support for the SED in order to gain the population’s allegiance to our state.⁶⁴⁴

Notwithstanding the *Konsum*’s attempts to integrate women into public and working life, its propaganda, at times, contradictorily maintained the traditional division of gender and pressed the idea that women were the primary shoppers and caretakers of their households.⁶⁴⁵ The party demanded that the *Konsum* support the state in its promulgation of propaganda and ideology by means of consumer consumption. According to an internal party document from the Department of Political Economy of 1946, the consumer co-operatives were charged with disseminating co-operative thought to women via a housewife-committee for every retail outlet. These committees were expected to deepen co-operative thought amongst women.⁶⁴⁶ This combination of consumerism and political ideology became a common method for the SED to garner female participation in politics.⁶⁴⁷ Such methods included the establishment of administrative posts to

⁶⁴² Köppert, "Dorf-Konsumgenossenschaften und Rentabilität," 21.

⁶⁴³ Hödt, "Konsummarken kleben," 123.

⁶⁴⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given), 1.

⁶⁴⁵ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 226.

⁶⁴⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vorlage an das Zentralsekretariat, Betr.: Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, 5.9.1946, 1-2.

⁶⁴⁷ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 219.

be filled by women at every level of the *Konsum*. These efforts were intended to help women “overcome ‘the passive role as *just* a shopper’... and influence them ideologically.”⁶⁴⁸

7.2. Shop Windows

Since the beginning of the DDR, shop window displays expressed the political message of SED socialism that demonstrated the victory of socialism and the socialist state.⁶⁴⁹ These shop windows portrayed images of class struggle in the midst of daily articles of consumption such as shoes, clothes, and knee-high socks. These images celebrated various themes: the working masses and their president, Wilhelm Pieck, “German-Soviet Friendship,” the struggle for peace and unity of Germany, and the planned economy.⁶⁵⁰ Additionally, every consumer co-operative was to have a shop window display with *Wandzeitungen* (wall news-sheets) with political symbols and slogans to signify and publicize the significance of current political and economic events. These shop window displays were intended to be an interesting attraction and educational point for customers, consumers, and employees. Through this political propaganda work (*Aufklärungsarbeit*), the *Konsum* and its employees attempted to influence and garner the support of its clientele for the new political order in East Germany (*antifaschistisch-demokratischen Ordnung*).⁶⁵¹ Historian Brett Fairbairn maintains that:

Co-operators had to work in their co-operatives while simultaneously using them as tools for the social, political, and attitudinal transformations directed by the party... and so co-operative shops hung banners with political slogans, set up political displays in their windows, and organized political meetings for their volunteers, members, and employees.⁶⁵²

⁶⁴⁸ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 14.

⁶⁴⁹ Schütterle, *Klassenkampf im Kaufhaus*: 57.

⁶⁵⁰ Wagner, *Bino, Fit und Arthur der Engel*: 35.

⁶⁵¹ SWA: U2/SWA 1594, Verkaufsstelle der ausgezeichneten Verkaufskultur (Date not given - probably the 1950s or early 1960s), 6-7.

⁶⁵² Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 13-14.

In so doing, the SED, along with the *Konsum*, was circulating, moralising, and politicizing every aspect of consumption. Historian Donna Harsch states, “the act of shopping became ideologically charged.”⁶⁵³

The shop window dominated the design of *Konsum* retail outlets. The arrangements were intended to broadcast and promote the *Konsum* as an expression and reflection of the economic and technical accomplishment of the East German economy – in effect, to demonstrate that the consumer co-operative retail outlets were a modern trade industry in a modern country. The following images were (modern) designs for the co-operative outlets in Bautzen and Delsnitz and demonstrate the prominence of the shop windows in these stores.⁶⁵⁴ Of course, the designs of the *Konsum* shop windows are entirely familiar. Hence, Illustrations 25 and 26 demonstrate the parallels between capitalist and socialist modernity.

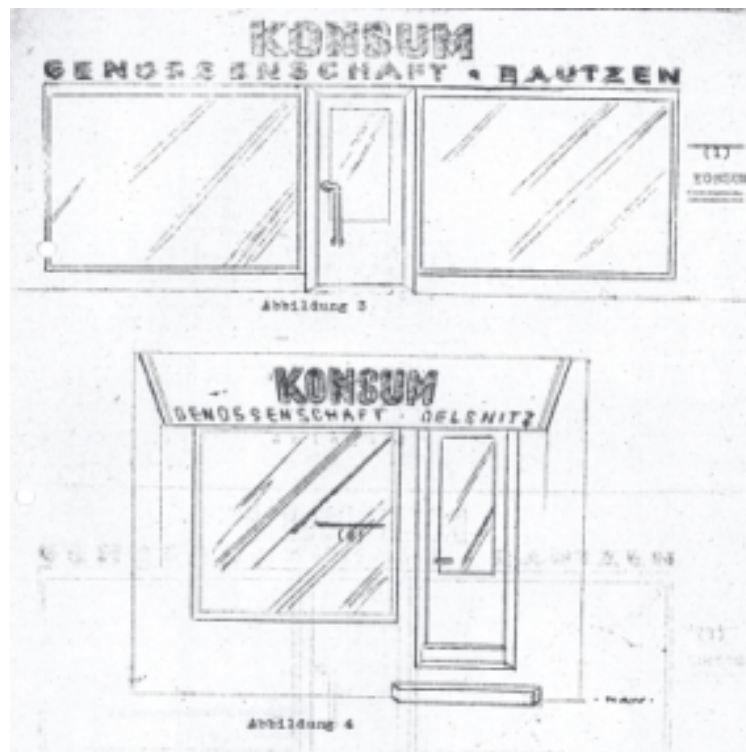


Illustration 25: the prominence of display windows in the design of retail outlets in Bautzen and Delsnitz

⁶⁵³ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 179.

⁶⁵⁴ "SWA: U64/128 (date not given)."



Illustration 26: Department store on Leipzig's Zschocherschen Straße, 1901⁶⁵⁵

The SED and the *Konsum* recognized the potential of shop windows as a means of communication and trained employees accordingly. In fact, many *Konsum* employees took courses in the development of shop windows and the design of posters for the window displays.⁶⁵⁶ During these courses, *Konsum* workers were instructed constantly to adjust the decorations and shop window displays so as to create new and interesting images for customers.⁶⁵⁷ The *Konsum* even held competitions for and gave bonuses to employees who produced the best window displays. Herr M. was recognized and given a special bonus for his work at retail outlet 164 in Leipzig. He was, as the archival document indicates, “responsible for the design of a display on a very busy street in which his window displays became the main attraction.”⁶⁵⁸ Shop window competitions were held between the *Konsum*, the HO, and private retailers. For instance, one such competition between them was entitled the “The best shop

⁶⁵⁵ Haikal, *Gute Geschäfte*: 72.

⁶⁵⁶ SWA: U2/1/39, Protokoll über die Arbeitsbesprechung der Abteilung Agitation und Werbung am 23.7.52.

⁶⁵⁷ SWA: U2/SWA 1245, 2. Lehrgang der Genossenschaftsschule des Verbandes Sächsischer Konsum-Genossenschaften in Gelenau/Erzgebirge vom 10. bis 26. Oktober 1946.

⁶⁵⁸ SWA: U2/SWA 1080, Vorschlag zur Auszeichnung, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, den 4. April 1959.

window for the month of German-Soviet-Friendship.”⁶⁵⁹ During the early 1950s, the competitors had to portray specific themes, namely German-Soviet-Friendship as the fundamental foundation of the German nation, the Stalinist constitution as a constitution for the entire world, and the celebration of Stalin’s birthday under the slogan: “Generalissimo Stalin, the best friend of the German people.”⁶⁶⁰



Illustration 27: “Every Co-operator is a friend of the Soviet Union” – *Konsum* shop windows promoting German-Soviet-Friendship (circa late 1940s to 1950s)⁶⁶¹

In the 1950s, the *Konsum* shop windows reflected SED policies on women’s issues. These displays portrayed women in both the workforce and in the professional world. Moreover, these displays promoted the use of modern appliances in the household, the use of which was to translate into more free time for women to devote to work or party activities. It should be noted, however, that the progressive policy of freeing women from the drudgery of household labour

⁶⁵⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 1245, Abschrift aus dem Rundschreiben vom Verband Sächsischer Konsumgenossenschaften Dresden (date not given probably the late 1940s or early 1950s).

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ SSC: 30878/440, (circa late 1940s to 1950s).

was partially triggered by the party's desperate need to have women replace and replenish a workforce decimated by the deaths of many men during the War and the postwar mass migration of trained professionals to the West.⁶⁶²

Following the death of Stalin in March 1953 and the 17 June Uprising, the SED, as mentioned in Chapter 2, embarked on the so-called New Course and attempted to use consumption as a tool to quell the population's general frustration with the socialist project. The *Konsum* aided this political initiative by increasing and improving its assortment of goods, particularly of food. To better serve customers, the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick* expanded its network from 104 retail outlets to 180 retail outlets during a one-month period from 30 September to 31 October 1953. During this time, there was also to be a general improvement in consumer culture by expanding the training of sales-personnel and augmenting decorative arrangements (including shop windows) in the retail outlets.⁶⁶³

The *Konsum* had to link the increasing abundance portrayed in its shop windows directly to SED policies and initiatives. In November 1953, *Konsum* propagandists attempted to use shop windows to convince consumers that there was growing prosperity as a result of the political and economic policies of the New Course (see section 2.4.8).⁶⁶⁴ By way of explanation, the SED was using the *Konsum* and its shop windows to suppress the opposition so adamantly expressed during the 17 June Uprising by drawing attention to the allegedly improving standard of living in the DDR. Additionally, these windows and decorations had to communicate and function as a reassurance to East German consumers of the steady rise in the quality and availability of

⁶⁶² Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 14.

⁶⁶³ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 3, Betriebs – Partei – Organisation – Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Köpenick, Friedrichshagen, 29.10.1953, 1.

⁶⁶⁴ SWA: U2/I/58, Entwurf der Arbeitsentschließung der Generalversammlung der Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig 11.1953.

goods.⁶⁶⁵ This abundance was portrayed through so-called stack windows (*Stapelfenster*) in which mountainous stacks of goods were arranged alongside political slogans verifying the realization of socialist, SED, and utopian goals.⁶⁶⁶



Illustration 28: So-called “stack windows” portraying socialist abundance.



Illustration 29: A further image portraying socialist abundance

The above left image has a soldier “protecting the people’s wealth” (year not given though likely sometime in the 1950s). The lower right image is a shop window in Zwickau promoting abundance of socialist agricultural practices and the 11th anniversary of the DDR in 1960.⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁵ SWA: U2/I/58, Entwurf der Arbeitsentschließung der Generalversammlung der Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig vom 11. Oktober 1953," 4.

⁶⁶⁶ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions, 602.

⁶⁶⁷ Above left image: "AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu Gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und Politischen Themen, 25 June (year not given)." Lower right image: "AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und politischen Themen, Zwickau 1960."

Shop windows also endorsed individual members of the SED. The visual propaganda in shop windows was designed to improve awareness for coming elections, as well as to promote and portray the character of individual candidates. The shop windows were also festooned with displays of candidates from the National Front.⁶⁶⁸



Illustration 30: *Konsum* raising the profile of members of the National Front⁶⁶⁹

The advertising/propaganda images in shop windows praised the socialist postwar recovery under the auspices of Soviet communism; furthermore, the images in the shop windows had to legitimize the socialist system of rule and endorse the success of the planned economy. In fact, it was often difficult to determine whether the shop windows were advertising consumer products or the East German state (see Illustrations 31 and 32). In these respects, the creators of the shop windows were no longer (merely) advertisers; instead, they became what German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas might describe as “dealers in public opinion.”⁶⁷⁰ The shop windows, in other words, transcended advertising to the point of becoming instruments

⁶⁶⁸ LAB: C Rep. 904-138 Nr. 4, Protokoll über die am 5.6.57 durchgeführte Parteileitungssitzung.

⁶⁶⁹ SSC: 30878/425, Gesellschaftspolitische Werbung – Volkswahlen 1954.

⁶⁷⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 1989), 193-94.

of opinion management, which “invades the process of ‘public opinions’ by systematically creating news events that attract attention... By means of a dramatic presentation of facts and calculated stereotypes *it* aims for a reorientation of public opinion by the formation of new authorities of symbols which will have acceptance.”⁶⁷¹ The “it” from the previous quotation refers to what Habermas describes as the “engineering of consent” and the urged acceptance of a “person, product, organization, or idea.”⁶⁷² More simply, the managers of shop window displays were literally attempting to sell the DDR and state-socialism to consumers, as well as mobilize them and garner their support for what was then an entirely new political system and status quo. In so doing, the state was communicating with East Germans not as citizens, but as consumers. Habermas states “enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers. As a result, [as seen particularly in the shop windows] public authority too competes for publicity.”⁶⁷³



Illustration 31: A *Konsum* shop window promoting consumer goods and the postwar recovery under socialism⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷¹ Ibid.

⁶⁷² Ibid., 195.

⁶⁷³ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁴ SSC: 30878/440, (circa late 1940s to 1950s).



Illustration 32: A *Konsum* shop window promoting the East German state under the slogan “Look at what our hands have built - new people building a new state.” (Date not given)⁶⁷⁵

Sometimes political messages were in the foreground of the shop windows, while in others the products themselves were paramount in delivering the message of the effectiveness of the socialist economic and political system. In the latter half of the 1960s, for instance, there were blatant political messages celebrating the 17th anniversary of the DDR, along with non-political displays that trumpeted the modern and high-quality products manufactured in the socialist economy. According to historian Romana Fuchshuber, there were ninety-eight political shop windows (sixty-eight of which referred to the Seventh Party Congress) and forty-five non-political shop windows in 1967. Some of the political displays included slogans such as “*Unsere Erfolge sind Beweis für die kluge und wissenschaftliche Politik unserer Partei* (our successes are proof of the intelligent and scientific governance of our party) and *VII. Parteitag – Für dich- für uns- für die Republik* (the Seventh Party Congress is for you, for us, and for the republic).⁶⁷⁶

The shop windows often mixed state-wide political slogans with local and regional flavour by portraying the strength and unity of both. Thus, the level of political or non-political

⁶⁷⁵ SSC: 30878/440, early 1950s.

⁶⁷⁶ Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 78-79.

content varied from community to community. In Berlin, the shop windows reflected the city's status as the showcase of socialism.⁶⁷⁷ In Karl-Marx-Stadt (today's Chemnitz), for example, there were sixteen political displays versus twenty-two non-political. On the other hand, the Leipzig shop windows had a great deal of political content dealing with various SED anniversaries, Soviet-German Friendship, and 8 March (International Women's Day).⁶⁷⁸ In 1970, the shop window designs in the Leipzig *Konsum* also promoted the significance of Leipzig as a centre of trade, specifically its trade fair, political stability, and the logic of the societal development of the DDR.⁶⁷⁹

The shop windows also had a cultural-educational function for women and youth. This was particularly apparent in the second half of the 1960s when the shop windows served to educate the population concerning the advantages of new household devices and to familiarize East Germans with the SED's policy on women's issues.⁶⁸⁰ The integration of youth into the socialist system was a critical component of SED and *Konsum* policy. In the second half of the 1970s, the shop windows reflected the SED's youth policies by instructing youth on the proper use of free time.⁶⁸¹ In an effort to appeal to youth, the *Konsum* combined the space flight of the East German Sigmund Jähn with youth fashion. This is evident in the following image and slogan: "*Willkommen Kosmoshelden*" (welcome space heroes). In so doing, the *Konsum* was attempting to fashion a politicized and idealized image of the socialist space hero, which East German youth were encouraged to emulate.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 78-79.

⁶⁷⁹ SWA: U2/(SWA 3320/2)I/190, Konzeption zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Versorgungsaufgaben zur Leipziger Frühjahrsmesse 1970 (1.3.bis 10.3.1970), Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, Leipzig, 14.1.1970.

⁶⁸⁰ Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 115.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 94-96.



Illustration 33: *Willkommen Kosmoshelden* – Welcome Space Heroes – Youth Fashion, Berlin, 1978⁶⁸³

At times, socialist decorators complained about having to work with the inconsistencies of combining political slogans with consumer goods in window displays. In particular, they were frustrated by shortages in decorating supplies and having little or no access to the appropriate seasonal fashions. Making matters worse, the procurement of decorating materials and financial support from the state proved troublesome, since the SED generally favoured the HO. As discussed in Chapter 2, the HO was given official status as a state-owned enterprise; hence, it was considered a higher form of socialist property and allocated more resources for advertising in comparison to the *Konsum* and private stores.⁶⁸⁴ As Pence correctly points out, “without concrete goods present to verify the claims to offer a better way of life offered by the political slogans, the ideology was rendered transparent and fostered mistrust in the socialist project.”⁶⁸⁵ Ironically, once goods became more readily available, designers were unsure about how to integrate products with political slogans and images. As the years progressed, the political theatre in the shop windows eased, and the actual consumer goods began to dominate

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁸⁴ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 584-86.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 596.

the displays. Still, the stringent demands on the administrators of the retail outlets persisted and important political events had to remain visible. While these images clearly reached consumers, the messages they conveyed seemed to be confused or perhaps even unintentionally satirical. Unsurprisingly, the viewing public often perceived displays as senseless and arbitrary. For instance, it is difficult to determine the meaning and association of the image of Honecker behind bottles of alcohol (see image below), or the image of Marx in the window of a rubbish collection point for the recycling of glass bottles, or the DDR-Emblem in front of brassieres.⁶⁸⁶



Illustration 34: Honecker in a shop window behind bottles of schnapps to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the DDR⁶⁸⁷

When shopping in co-operative stores, consumers were exposed to window-displays and posters promoting co-operative-political perspectives, as well as SED political slogans that illustrated the party's intended totalitarian societal transformations and represented the objectives of the socialist planned economy.⁶⁸⁸ In fact, these displays often included a mix of political slogans in association with desirable consumer products. The initial consumption experience in

⁶⁸⁶ Wagner, *Bino, Fit und Arthur der Engel*: 35.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Diskussionsgrundlage zu Punkt 2) der Tagesordnung für die Beiratssitzung des Konsum – Hauptsekretariats am 11. Und 12. September 1947 in Kühlungsborn: Berlin, den 15. September 1947, 28-29.

the co-operatives was further politicized through the Cold War and the DDR's political and economic competition with West Germany.⁶⁸⁹ As a result, the intended message of East German consumption was clear: the Soviet system emerging in the DDR was the more viable alternative. These displays and shop windows also reflected the widening fissure between East and West Germany in the political, economic, and cultural realms. According to Katherine Pence, "the display windows in the consumer co-operatives became the places in which the newly emerging East and West German societies competed."⁶⁹⁰ For this reason, state and *Konsum* functionaries were actively committed to the improvement of shop windows, for they believed that the political message of the DDR was closely tied to them. Public officials from the government's economic departments, such as the Ministry for Trade and Provision, and the party's economic departments supervised the development of these displays.⁶⁹¹

In the DDR, the shop window became a focal point of meaning, symbolism, and signification in which modern consumption and economic recovery were to be expressed. An archival document from the Saxon State Archive in Chemnitz states, "the signified message had to display and express [i.e., objectify or reify] the success of the socialist state."⁶⁹² For the social philosopher and political economist Adam Smith, commodities were nothing more than objects that were circulated. On the other hand, DDR advertisers used shop window displays to bring commodities to life through spectacle. As historian Thomas Richards argues:

For Smith, commodities neither attract nor repel representation. They are simply there, stockpiled, ready and waiting to enter the long process of circulation to which he devotes the bulk of *The Wealth of Nations*. Commodities are dead letters, supplies animated and

⁶⁸⁹ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 156.

⁶⁹⁰ Pence, "Schaufenster des sozialistischen Konsums," 92.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 97-98.

⁶⁹² SSC: 30878/1077/2, Ergänzung zur Arbeitsentschließung vom 14.6.1958 auf der Delegiertenversammlung am 25. Oktober 1958.

actuated by the spirit of demand. In the mid-nineteenth century the commodity became the living letter of the law of supply and demand. It literally came alive.”⁶⁹³

Similarly, the “success” of the DDR was to be portrayed in the reification of SED ideology through the display of modern consumer goods. In other words, the *Konsum* and its shop window displays were selling the culture and ideology of the DDR, as well as promoting and propagating its semiotics, social standards, and codes of conduct. The ways in which East Germans ultimately understood and experienced their meaning remains mostly hypothetical. Yet, as will be seen in Chapters 8 and 9, the *Eingaben* and the interviews conducted for this dissertation demonstrate that East Germans were often distracted by the shortages in the stores, which significantly lessened and undermined the impact of propaganda and ideology associated with specific products and the DDR’s vision of modernity and abundance.

7.3. Conclusions

In their work *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Victoria O’Donnell and Garth Jowett write that “propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate, cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.”⁶⁹⁴ While these shop windows were not always ornamented with political slogans, they deliberately and systematically attempted to shape the perceptions of consumers and communicate to them that the SED’s political economy was the better alternative to the West German model. Moreover, *Konsum* propagandists and advertisers were attempting to legitimize the Marxist-Leninist worldview through the perception of a plentiful consumer culture. Although the shop windows may have been an attempt to reflect the achievements of socialist productive capacity, the drab reality of shopping in the consumer co-operative frequently offset

⁶⁹³ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 2.

⁶⁹⁴ Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Second ed. (Newbury Park: Sage 1992), 6.

and contradicted these displays of political unity and economic prosperity. During periods of economic shortages (often the case in the DDR), the goods displayed in the shop windows were often unavailable for purchase in the store, consequently angering customers and forcing them to take individual action by acquiring goods through personal relationships or the black market.⁶⁹⁵

In many ways, the *Konsum* was simultaneously an effective and ineffective propaganda apparatus. Its potential effectiveness could have been realized through its ability to disseminate propaganda to targeted segments of the population (*Zielgruppe*), namely female and rural consumers. This tactic, however, was ineffective and counterproductive, since this propaganda produced an image of plenty that the *Konsum* stores were rarely capable of fulfilling. In fact, consumers were often unable to purchase the goods showcased in the shop windows. As a result, the state inadvertently engendered a highly visible contrast between the idealized consumer culture portrayed in the shop windows and the reality of bleak consumption in the *Konsum*. An anonymous interviewee indicated that *Konsum* propaganda had no direct influence on her, though she did find the political themes in the shop windows amusing.⁶⁹⁶ Hence, the SED failed to improve its image through the positive reification of itself in desirable consumer products. Indeed, the association and embodiment of the party with consumer products ultimately backfired, as East Germans blamed the SED and the *Konsum* for “shoddy” goods and perpetual shortages. To make matters still worse for the SED, consumers negatively juxtaposed the party’s political slogans with these products, thereby discrediting the party and socialism.⁶⁹⁷ The people’s fundamental, though not complete, rejection of the *Konsum* will be a main theme of the upcoming chapters.

⁶⁹⁵ Fuchshuber, *Zwischen Propagandainstrument und Werbemittel*: 116.

⁶⁹⁶ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁶⁹⁷ Kaminsky, “True Advertising,” 284.

PART III: REJECTION

People's reactions to the *Konsum*

8. “Manipulating the System to their minimum Disadvantage:” Propaganda, shopping, and venting in the *Konsum*

Wider patterns such as the growth of consumer culture and the ‘privatisation’ of aspects of life and leisure, as well as the individualized channels of complaints and grumbling – all fostered and sustained by official policies – ironically led to or reinforced the growth of individualism in this would-be collectivized society.

- Historian Mary Fulbrook⁶⁹⁸

Over time, they [East Germans] learnt what could or could not be usefully discussed in any given context, and they learnt to deploy – or even, among younger generations, actually internalize – the ‘language’ of ‘actually existing socialism,’ even if they did not always fully agree with the substance.

- Historian Mary Fulbrook⁶⁹⁹

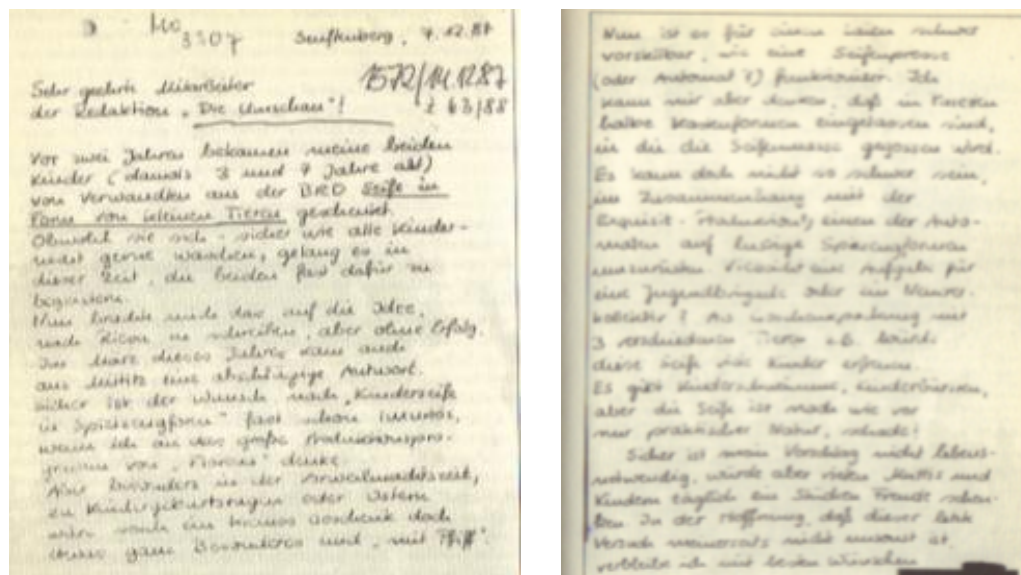


Illustration 35: The handwritten Eingaben written by Angelika Grenz, 7 December 1987⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁸ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 8.

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁷⁰⁰ Angelika Grenz, "Eingaben: Angelika Grenz, Senftenberg, den 7. Dezember 1987," in *"Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation": Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR*, ed. Ina Merkel (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2000), 196-97.

Shopping in the *Konsum* was an experience that involved a kaleidoscope of day-to-day activities, consumption, propaganda, ideological indoctrination, and the complex interaction between the party and the populace. However, as we have seen, the SED's attempt to control all facets of consumption ultimately backfired whenever expectations were not met (a common occurrence). As a result, East Germans vented their frustrations with consumption at the party and its version of a socialist consumer culture (*Verkaufskultur*).⁷⁰¹ As Judd Stitzel aptly demonstrates in his book *Fashioning Socialism*, the SED's attempt to establish official theories and ideology failed because East Germans ultimately judged the achievements of socialism by what they could actually purchase in stores.⁷⁰² What is more, the party was in the powerful position of controlling the command economy, the allocation of commodities, and the politicized message of consumption. For this reason, consumers' everyday experiences when shopping in the *Konsum* retail outlets became a critical propagandistic and ideological junction in the relationship between state and society in the DDR. However, the stark contrasts between the propaganda images of consumer abundance and the actual shopping experience in the *Konsum* retail outlets contributed to East Germans' disillusionment with the entire system of state socialism.⁷⁰³ Therefore, when speaking about the public motivation for the revolution of 1989, historian Gary Bruce suggests "it was often not solely a poor standard of living, but the combination of this with the overblown SED propaganda that eroded the legitimacy of the régime, and drove angry East German citizens to the streets [in 1953 and 1989]."⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰¹ André Steiner, "Dissolution of the 'Dictatorship over Needs'?: Consumer Behaviour and Economic reform in East Germany in the 1960s," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 167.

⁷⁰² Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*.

⁷⁰³ The politicization and feminization of consumption are partially examined in Mark McCulloch, "The Union of Consumer Cooperatives and the SED's Embryonic Educational and Ideological Systems in the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany, 1945-1949," *Eras* 12(2011).

⁷⁰⁴ Bruce, *The Firm*: 174.

This chapter expands on Stiziel and Bruce's arguments by applying them to the experience of shopping in the *Konsum* stores. It highlights the difficulties and disappointments that East Germans experienced when unable to acquire a desired commodity and raises the following questions: what was the shopping experience like in the *Konsum* retail outlets and how did this impact people's perceptions of the state? This chapter also challenges the notion of totalitarianism and endorses the idea of a nascent civil society in the DDR by examining how *Eingaben* forced the state to react to and try to fulfil the consumer demands of its citizens.

8.1. Propaganda versus reality

Consumers in the Soviet Occupation Zone/German Democratic Republic experienced a wide spectrum of consumer experiences ranging from the satisfaction of finding needed wares to endlessly rummaging through state-owned *Konsum*-stores in search of a particular item. While the cost of products such as bread, milk, and meat were subsidized by the state and readily available, East Germans generally could not rely on the steady and predictable flow of desirable goods such as TVs, cars, and washing machines. At the same time, however, the planned economy produced an overabundance of poorly produced wares that could only be off-loaded at bargain prices. To make matters still worse for the *Konsum* and its retail network, the East German consumers compared their living experience to the perceived quality of life in West Germany.⁷⁰⁵ Ultimately, the products available and the experience of shopping in the *Konsum* stores were examples of the ways in which the state shaped everyday life in the DDR. While shopping had become a major focus of the régime, the SED's propagandized promises of

⁷⁰⁵ David F. Crew, "Consuming Germany and the Cold War: Consumption and National Identity in East and West Germany, 1949-1989, An Introduction," in *Consuming Germany and the Cold War*, ed. David F. Crew (New York: Berg, 2003), 1.

material abundance ultimately raised consumers' expectations to a point that the party and the *Konsum* simply could not deliver.⁷⁰⁶

Consumers had to negotiate between the realities of consumption in the DDR and the propaganda of *Verkaufskultur* (socialist consumer culture) by spending endless and often fruitless hours in search of needed wares. To quote historian Katherine Pence:

Unmotivated shopkeepers failed to uphold proposed standards of cleanliness, service and décor. All these factors created a wide disparity between the reality of daily shopping and the conception of ideal consumer culture, which often remained an unattained goal. Consumption in the young DDR usually was time-consuming, laborious, unpleasant and far from the promised "joyful" experience.⁷⁰⁷

Similarly, one newspaper reader stated, "as soon as you opened the newspaper, you were placated and deceived. The slogan may have read that '400,000 electric razors are available to the population.' This, however, only increased my anger, since I didn't need an electric razor. I needed something else."⁷⁰⁸ In the Eastern bloc, women were usually responsible for distinguishing between these forms of propaganda and the bleak realities of consumption and everyday life in the Soviet Bloc – that is, they had to wade through the politicized consumer culture to feed and clothe their families. This required the ability to judge the quality of merchandise and the knowledge of how to manipulate the system to acquire goods through both legal and illegal means, namely by what Russians dubbed *blat*, or in the East German case, *Beziehungen*/Vitamin B (relations/connections).⁷⁰⁹

The following sub-sections examine the experience of consumption in the co-operative retail outlets and the behaviours, strategies, and disappointments of consumer-tacticians in East

⁷⁰⁶ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 224-25.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., 226.

⁷⁰⁸ Annette Kaminsky, "Einkaufsbeutel und Bückware," in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Munich C.H. Beck, 2009), 254.

⁷⁰⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162.

Germany. The overarching point is to demonstrate that this was a society with endemic shortages resulting in hardships, general discomfort, frustration, and inordinate amounts of wasted time. And as Fulbrook suggests, “Much of the SED’s efforts were wasted: the realities of everyday life tended to belie the propaganda put out by the régime.”⁷¹⁰

8.1.1. Actual consumption in the *Konsum*

The inability of the *Konsum* to create consumer satisfaction was a constant source of frustration for party officials. Internal party documents from 1946 demonstrate that the party recognized the growing instability and resentment of the population in the realm of *Verkaufskultur*. An archival document from 23 September 1946 states “within the population there was evident frustration and unrest for some time because of the irregular distribution of food and *Genussmittel* (luxury foods, alcohol, and tobacco), as well as industrial products.”⁷¹¹ In order to remedy this situation and quell the population’s demands, representatives from the departments of Domestic Trade and Commerce put forward the suggestion that the consumer co-operatives improve the availability of these products and open new stores in cities and rural areas, as well as establish mobile sales units.⁷¹²



Illustration 36: *Konsum* Mobile Sales, late 1940s/early 1950s⁷¹³

Illustration 37: A new textiles store in Dommitzsch in the 1950s⁷¹⁴

⁷¹⁰ Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*: 132.

⁷¹¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/113, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker: Abschrift: Berlin, den 23. September 1946, für die Abteilung für Ernährung.

⁷¹² Ibid. See also Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 199.

⁷¹³ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 156.

Customers continued to criticize the *Konsum* retail outlets for being unappealing, small, and under-stocked.⁷¹⁵ Furthermore, a typical shopping trip to the *Konsum* store was often an unpleasant experience in which the consumer encountered surly salespeople.⁷¹⁶ In late January 1949, the authorities reported that the unfriendly and poor service in the consumer co-operatives was a constant source of complaint. Mark Landsman, a historian of East Germany, writes:

Whether in the weighing of bread, or including packaging material in the weighing of bread, or the unfriendliness of the sales people, the overall impression was one of great indifference on the part of *Konsum* employees towards customers. In addition to the unpleasant salespeople, the actual co-ops themselves were often poorly maintained. They not only failed to meet hygienic requirements, but, as an investigation of one co-op reported, "The varied array of goods on sale works to the disadvantage of the food department... It is under no circumstance to be tolerated further that foodstuffs of all kinds like bread, butter, fat, cereals, and sugar are mixed in with vegetables, potatoes and other goods which develop dust." The investigation took particular exception to a separate glass-enclosed room where meat, sausages, and other goods were sold: "It defies description that in this wet room sacks with sugar and other important foodstuffs lay on the floor so that their contents become completely wet and the customers rightly complain."⁷¹⁷

SMAD officials reprimanded *Konsum* employees for failing to establish adequate consumer provisioning and distribution. In fact, the *Konsum* officials were taken to task by the SMAD for the poor state of many of the co-operative stores. The lack of proper décor in them especially infuriated the Soviet officers in attendance. One such Soviet officer put it this way: "the German has shown himself to have grown unaccustomed to saying thank you. One has the feeling that the salesperson finds his work to be a heavy burden – indeed, this is not the case everywhere, but it has become characteristic."⁷¹⁸

The state's artificially controlled price policies in combination with poor planning, production, and distribution, created a system in which there were not only relentless shortages

⁷¹⁴ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 21.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷¹⁶ Kirsch, "Güstrow -- eine Konsumgenossenschaft in der Praxis," 90.

⁷¹⁷ Landsman, *Dictatorship and Demand*: 44.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

of consumer goods, but also surpluses of good that would not sell. Consequently, the consumer co-operative stores were often full of wares, though it was often difficult for a customer to find the exact product for which one searched.⁷¹⁹ Historian Judd Stitzel argues:

The palpable presence of an overwhelming number of goods that remained unsold in stores for months and years exacerbated consumers' already significant anger over the lack of desired items. These unsold wares formed a highly visible indication of the dysfunctional elements of the planned economy and its failure to fulfill consumers' needs and desires. Given the highly politicized nature of consumption and the practical meaninglessness of citizen's votes at the ballot box, the purchase or refusal to purchase East German products could be considered part of an indirect plebiscite on the DDR's political and economic system.⁷²⁰

Fitzkow states in an interview, "there were many goods for sale, which nobody wanted. For example, there were vast amounts of spoiled fruit and vegetables (mostly cucumbers), especially when they were in season."⁷²¹ This problem of over-supply of unwanted goods continued to plague the DDR. As low quality goods piled up, retail staff complained about the difficulty of trying to sell them. Given the close proximity of the consumer abundance of West Germany's market economy, party functionaries grew concerned that the visual and physical dominance of low-quality goods reflected poorly on the SED's style of socialism and its command economy. Rather than making efforts to contribute to egalitarian consumer possibilities, however, the state exploited differences in income by increasing the prices for higher quality goods, or selling them for hard currency in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷²²

There were continual bottlenecks in the distribution of goods at the *Konsum* outlets, especially for highly desired wares (TVs, washing machines, cars, and so on). This uneven and unpredictable distribution led to hoarding and impulse buying whenever these goods randomly

⁷¹⁹ Ina Merkel, "Der aufhaltsame Aufbruch in die Konsumgesellschaft," in *Wunderwirtschaft: DDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren* (Köln: Böhlau, 1996), 14-15.

⁷²⁰ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 94.

⁷²¹ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

⁷²² Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 118.

became available. Consumers with income to spare often bought up certain articles specifically out of the fear that they might not be there again. This practice of hoarding further destabilized the SED's promised ideal of rational, planned consumption, which was worsened considerably during times of political uncertainty such as after the construction of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961. People also began to hoard goods out of fear of rising inflation or rumours of price increases. Furthermore, a purchase did not necessarily mean complete satisfaction with the item, as many manufactured goods, particularly clothing, were altered in some way after purchase (i.e., adjusting length, width, dyeing, or bleaching).⁷²³

In 1970 in Zittau (a small community on the German-Czech border), the *Konsum* closed its retail outlets 1120 and 1122 without notifying the population. According to a Stasi report, customers were so disappointed with these closures and, more broadly, socialist consumer culture that they expressed their anger by protesting in the forms of meetings with the National Front and *Eingaben*. In spite of their protests, these two *Konsum* shops remained closed. In response, the *Konsum* received anonymous calls threatening to sabotage the stores if they were not reopened the following Monday. In one call, the perpetrator stated, "I warn you that something is going to happen."⁷²⁴ Indeed, something did happen. At the *Konsum* retail outlets 1120 and 1122, the shop windows became targets of anger and were destroyed. The perpetrators then entered the shops through the broken windows and started fires. The report concludes with the notation that the Stasi had not yet caught the perpetrators.⁷²⁵

⁷²³ Judd Stitzel, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining: Consumer Culture and the Relationship between State and Society in the GDR," in *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 258-59.

⁷²⁴ BStU - MfS BV Dresden Abt. XVIII 13035, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Dresden Kreisdienststelle Zittau, Vorsätzliche Brandstiftung und Vorsätzliche Beschädigung sozialistischen Eigentums in der Konsum-Verkaufsstelle 1122 und 1120 Pethau, Hauptstraße 27 Zittau, äußere Weberstraße, Zittau, den 27.9.70, 3.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-4.

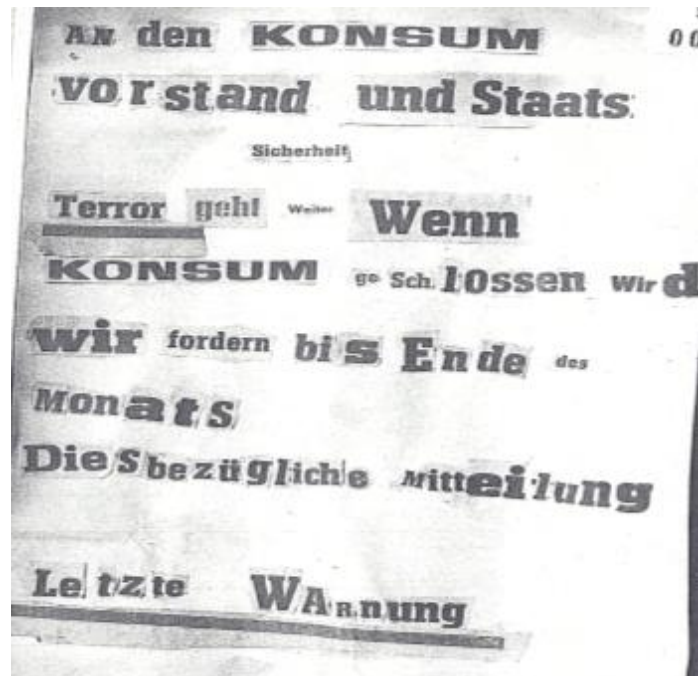


Illustration 38: A threatening letter sent to the *Konsum* and the Stasi warning against the closure of retail outlets, 1971⁷²⁶

The *Konsum* propaganda, especially the *Verkaufsgespräch*, as discussed in previous chapters, was often counterproductive because of the stark contrast between propaganda and the actual shopping experience in these stores. While ideological conversations with customers and members took place within retail outlets, attempts to engage in these conversations were not warmly received by customers at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick*. Instead, customers complained about the shortages of milk, butter, and vegetables. Customers often replied to sales staff's attempts at ideological conversation with the following answer: "first and foremost worry about providing us with a better selection of goods. Only then will you be able to engage us in political and ideological conversations."⁷²⁷ Frau H. described her negative experience at the *Konsum* butchery in Zwickau on 23 February 1989. She complained that only one saleswoman serviced this outlet even though the store was often full of customers. She said,

⁷²⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁷²⁷ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 4, Stand der Wahlvorbereitung und Situationsbericht, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin Köpenick, 20.6.57.

“I had to stress that this kind of service was not an isolated case. It really should be considered if it is wise to anger the population right before the election.”⁷²⁸

The *Konsum*, along with its retail outlets and the products sold within them, was a communications network. Historian Rainer Gries suggests, “In its capacity as a consumer good, the product must meet some material need or desire, and it must also serve as a means of communication. Not only is the product consumed; networks of communicative relationships also form around it.”⁷²⁹ A 2011 interview coincides with Gries’s argument. During the interview, Fitzkow describes the *Konsum*’s propaganda as ineffective and his general interaction with this organization as negative. For him, the primary message the *Konsum* portrayed to customers was actually counterproductive because, as he states, “the experience of shopping in the *Konsum* could best be described as shortages or continual bottlenecks in the delivery of goods [*Mängel oder standigen Engpässe bei den Waren*]. From the beginning to the end, the distribution in these stores was full of gaps [*lückenhaft*], which only became worse in the 1980s.”⁷³⁰

Of course, not every experience of shopping in the *Konsum* was negative. An anonymous interviewee describes the shopping experience as “relatively positive, especially since the main objective of the *Konsum* was supplying the population with basic foodstuffs. In this respect, it delivered a regular supply of goods to the population, namely bread, milk, meat, and sugar at very cheap, state-subsidized prices.”⁷³¹ To speculate, this may be a point of intergenerational difference in the DDR. That is to say, the generation that experienced the

⁷²⁸ SWA: U64/242, Eingabe, *Betreff*: Verkaufsstelle Vettermannstraße VKE-Nr. 0715, 31. Jan 1989.

⁷²⁹ Rainer Gries, ““Serve Yourself!” The History and Theory of Self-Service in West and East Germany,” in *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Pamela E. Swett, S. Jonathan Wiesen, and Jonathan R. Zatlin (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 309.

⁷³⁰ “Author’s interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.”

⁷³¹ “Author’s interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.”

deprivations of the War and postwar period was likely more conciliatory towards the *Konsum*, whereas their children and those exposed to West German advertising were less willing to accommodate socialist consumer culture. It should also be noted that the evidence that remains is overwhelmingly negative since consumers would rarely write *Eingaben* when they were satisfied with an acquired good. Perhaps we are, therefore, only seeing one side of the coin. Yet, the positive and the negative shopping experiences in the retail outlets impacted how citizens perceived their socialist state, as such experiences generally served to either legitimize or de-legitimize it in the eyes of the consumer.

8.1.2. Consumption in the countryside

The co-operative provision of goods in the countryside was fused with political considerations.⁷³² There was a close collaboration of the party with the consumer co-operatives to increase the influence of the party through consumption in Thuringia, Mecklenburg, and Brandenburg. However, from the party's perspective, its political influence was weakly developed in these areas. To offset these weaknesses, the *Konsum* was expected to use its influence and extensive network of retail outlets and educational facilities in the countryside to promulgate the ideology of the SED. The SED also recognized the potential of the *Konsum* to garner support for the party by adequately supplying the rural populace during the harvest.⁷³³

The SED ordered the *Konsum* to improve living conditions in the countryside by establishing a co-operative sales outlet in every town – regardless of size. Consequently, these outlets became more plentiful in rural areas than in urban centres (see maps in Appendix

⁷³² Lutz Laschewski and unter Mitarbeit von Andreas Schulze, *Konsum im Wandel: Wege und Perspektiven ostdeutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*, vol. 42 (Berlin Institut für Genossenschaftswesen an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 1998), 25.

⁷³³ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, **Bericht** über die Besprechung der Sachbearbeiter für Konsumgenossenschaften bei den Landesvorständen am 11. Und 12. November 1948 – Berlin, 22. November 1948, 126.

11.1).⁷³⁴ These retail outlets were inserted into old castles, manor houses, and apartment complexes. In the following months and years, more permanent facilities were built to house the consumer co-operatives. In larger centres, *Konsum* department stores were built.⁷³⁵ According to internal party documents from the Department of Trade and Provision, which were addressed to Gerhard Lucht (president of the VDK from 1954 to 1963), the primary task of the co-operatives was to ensure the best possible provision of the population in the countryside. This became the basis for the initial steps towards the creation of a socialist consumer culture in rural areas.⁷³⁶

The SED expected to gain political capital by satisfactorily supplying the rural population through this development of a widespread network of *Konsum* retail outlets. The rural consumer co-operatives were to assist the party in neutralising and integrating potential resistance in the countryside during the establishment of the agricultural co-operatives (*landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaften*, **LPG**) and the “socialist transformation of agriculture” in July 1952.⁷³⁷ During this transformational and revolutionary period, the *Konsum* played a critical role as the state’s primary retail trader to the inhabitants of the newly formed LPGs.⁷³⁸ To ensure the rapid and unhindered growth of the LPGs, the number of consumer co-operatives continued to increase.⁷³⁹ An official party document from the Department of Trade and Provision states, “co-operatives were the primary means of trade in rural areas. They were bolstered both politically and economically in order to influence the political and cultural life in the smaller centres

⁷³⁴ Laschewski and Schulze, *Konsum im Wandel*, 42: 25.

⁷³⁵ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 24.

⁷³⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. August 8, 1959 recommendations written by Gerhard Lucht, president of the VdK, entitled Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung, Durchführung und Auswertung des IV. Genossenschaftstages, 5.

⁷³⁷ Annette Kaminsky, *Wohlstand, Schönheit, Glück: Kleine Konsumgeschichte der DDR*, Originalausgabe. ed. (München: Beck, 2001), 38-41.

⁷³⁸ Ludwig, "Vom Dorfkonsum zum >>Komplexen System der Landversorgung<<," 39.

⁷³⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. 13 August 1958, Internal Party Material entitled Vorbereitung der Wahlen in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 11.

through consumption.”⁷⁴⁰ The SED, in other words, adopted the policy that an important prerequisite for the implementation of these revolutionary transformations could be met through satisfactory consumption in the new rural co-operative stores.⁷⁴¹

Within a year, thousands of rural co-operative outlets (*Verkaufsstellen*) were opened. By the end of 1953, there were 996 regionally (*Kreis*) organized rural and urban consumer co-operatives in the DDR. In addition, twenty-four regional co-operatives were opened in the *Stadtkreisen*. Even though the *Konsum* stores and retail centres were generally unprofitable, there was a small co-operative in every East German community.⁷⁴²

Shopping was often an unpleasant, unrewarding, and disillusioning experience in spite of the relative ubiquity of the *Konsum* in the countryside (at least in the cities, especially Berlin, consumers had other retail options). The *Konsum* outlet in Saalfeld was a case in point. Because it could not satisfy demand, many consumers turned to private merchants to meet their daily needs. As party personnel at the *Konsum* admitted, private dealers sold a greater variety of higher-quality goods at lower prices, while they, in contrast, had very little to offer local residents. Many Saalfelders complained about people with personal connections to *Konsum* saleswomen, since some gained unfair access to goods at the expense of others.⁷⁴³ This was sarcastically referred to as Vitamin B, for *Beziehungen*, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter. Informal networks or Vitamin B were a common technique in acquiring desired goods, which resulted in frustration and resentment for those who lacked such connections or *Beziehungen*. The following humorous poem is one such example:

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁴² Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 20.

⁷⁴³ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 249-52.

In the *Konsum* store no aunt
 In the H.O. store no relatives
 From the West no package
 And you still ask me how
 I'm doing.

*Beim Konsum keine Tante
 Beim H.O. keine Verwandte
 Aus dem Westen kein Paket
 Und da fragen Sie mir noch
 wie es mir geht.*⁷⁴⁴

Customers were repeatedly frustrated by supply shortages and uneven distribution practices in Saalfeld, while the authorities and workers who managed the *Konsum* and other state-run stores also grew annoyed. For example, the SED District Secretariat in Saalfeld berated the *Konsum* for neglecting the rural areas, where it was the main supplier. Historian Andrew Port writes “this was especially disconcerting at a time when many farmers were complaining about the failure of the *Konsum* to offer its customers more indispensable items like blankets.”⁷⁴⁵

At an SED trade conference in 1959, nearly all areas of rural East Germany reported dissatisfaction with consumption. The Weekly Post (*Wochenpost*) often described the negative shopping situation in the countryside. This is evident in the following passage: “the co-operative farmers, the rural workers, and many people living in the countryside had to perpetually travel to the nearest district principal town (*Kreisstadt*) in a search to buy this or that item.”⁷⁴⁶ This frustration was compounded because most consumers in the countryside had to shop in the *Konsum*, which supplied the rural population with over seventy percent of their consumer goods.⁷⁴⁷ This dependence on the *Konsum* and lack of other alternatives engendered a situation that complicated the ability of rural inhabitants to find a desired product, thereby making it necessary for them to travel to the nearest district capital or even Berlin to search for needed wares. According to one frustrated *Konsum* shopper, “my wife and I spent two days searching in

⁷⁴⁴ Stitzel, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining," 263.

⁷⁴⁵ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 247.

⁷⁴⁶ Kaminsky, *Wohlstand, Schönheit, Glück*: 43-44.

⁷⁴⁷ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 30-31.

vain for a fully automatic washing machine. When four or five new units were delivered, they were immediately sold.”⁷⁴⁸

By the late 1980s, consumption and the supply situation were rapidly deteriorating in the countryside as the DDR’s command economy began to flounder to the point that the Stasi was becoming alarmed. For instance, consumers in Ebersbach (a town of around 8,000 inhabitants near the German-Czech border) had to deal with severe unpredictability in the availability of goods. In *Kreis Löbau*, there was limited availability of fruits and vegetables. As a result, the Stasi came to the conclusion that it had to collect more information about how the population was reacting to the supply problems. This being so, the Ministry of State Security, a highly effective and repressive secret police agency subsequently intensified its surveillance in the sleepy town of Ebersbach and *Kreis Löbau*.⁷⁴⁹ The likely result of this increased observation was Stasi officers wasting vast amount of working time and resources.

8.2. Selective participation, individual agency, and the consumer-tactician

The section will examine selective participation, individual agency, and the consumer-tactician. As discussed in section 1.3.2, the consumer-tactician had to navigate the DDR’s urban and retail spaces. In a sense, the consumer-tactician was the product or subject of these ideological manifestations, yet also the manipulator of them in ways that were separate from the interests of their producer – the SED.⁷⁵⁰ Historian Eli Rubin describes such tactics:

East Germans learned, by necessity, to become far more self-sufficient in the repair, maintenance and general understanding of the things in their everyday life than were most people in the capitalist consumer societies of the West. And when an East German could not repair a television, a heating panel, a carburetor or a leaky roof, they could almost always rely on a neighbour to do it for them, often in exchange for some

⁷⁴⁸ Kaminsky, *Wohlstand, Schönheit, Glück*: 147.

⁷⁴⁹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 20544, Bezirksverwaltung für Staatssicherheit Bereich Auswertung 1, Politisch-operative Einschätzung zu den in der Stadt Ebersbach, Kreis Löbau, aufgetretenen Reaktionen der Bevölkerung zur Versorgung, Dresden, 4. Juli 1988, 66.

⁷⁵⁰ de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*: xii.

other service or good such as babysitting, vegetables from the community garden plot, or maybe even use of official connections to gain an advantageous spot on a state waiting-list. Most East Germans developed a kind of self-reliance and independence from the state as well as the market.⁷⁵¹

Although incapable of directly overturning the state, selective participation was essential for surviving in the DDR and, by extension, inadvertently undermining the SED régime. While not revolutionary, selective participation did contribute to revolutionary outcomes. After all, for *Konsum* customers and members (mostly women and rural inhabitants), the goal was not to overthrow the system, but to survive and enhance their lives within the SED's system of domination. By nibbling away at the state, these people were, as E.J. Hobsbawm so aptly puts it, “‘working the system’ to [their] advantage – or rather to [their] minimum disadvantage.”⁷⁵²

Consumer-tacticians responded to the dearth of consumer goods in a variety of resourceful ways. Labouring women would frequently leave work for short periods to attempt to attain sought after goods often sold out by the late afternoon. Queuing, however, was the most common practice, and it was not uncommon for consumers to line up for hours outside the store.⁷⁵³ In the words of historian Katherine Pence, “in search of scarce groceries, women regularly stood in long queues and dragged their shopping bags from store to store. The extra burden of shopping under these conditions complicated the ostensible state goal to integrate women more fully into the workforce.”⁷⁵⁴ Consumers attempted to increase the likelihood of being at the store when new goods arrived by means of networking, complaining, and making regular visits to the local consumer co-operative.⁷⁵⁵ The desire for products perpetuated a

⁷⁵¹ Eli Rubin, "The Trabant: Consumption, Eigen-Sinn, and Movement," *History Workshop Journal* 68, no. 1 (2009): 37.

⁷⁵² Hobsbawm, "Peasants and politics," 13.

⁷⁵³ Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 249-52.

⁷⁵⁴ Pence, "Women on the Verge," 291.

⁷⁵⁵ Stitzel, "Shopping, Sewing, Networking, Complaining," 255-56.

situation that resulted in the alteration of goods to a new purpose hence a general avoidance of waste.⁷⁵⁶

When it came to day-to-day life, consumer-tacticians, especially women, expressed their concerns by resisting the SED's plans through acts of individual self-interest and selective participation. For example, employed mothers missed work and lamented the quantity and quality of housing, food, and consumer goods. Women also used the SED's rhetoric about female emancipation to gain concessions from the state. These tactics were almost always individual, but they nevertheless demonstrated to the state that their needs had to be met in order for women to maintain jobs, participate in educational and training courses, and bear children. These tactics compelled the SED to make adjustments to production goals, primarily by pressuring the *Konsum* factories to produce and sell higher quality goods. Through everyday actions (*Eingaben*, arguments, complaints, and occasional open protests), East German women were able to influence the economic priorities of the régime to include the consumption needs of the family. In other words, a production-obsessed and male-dominated SED leadership was compelled to implement a welfare policy with consumerist features to placate women's demands.⁷⁵⁷

Female consumers used their alleged status as women, as housewives, and as members of the DFD to pressure the *Konsum* into delivering wanted goods. The following example of an *Eingabe* from 1965 is, according to historian Felix Mühlberg, quite typical for it contains the following components: an expression of who one is and why their needs are important,

⁷⁵⁶ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 45.

⁷⁵⁷ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 7-11.

references to DDR norms and values, a threat, and a request.⁷⁵⁸ For instance, one letter from 1965 states:

In the name of the membership of DFD Group 43 and all women in our area, we protested the closing of *Konsum* butcher shop 102. The closing of this store was in no way in accordance with the resolutions of the Women's Congress and the Politburo of the SED, which were intended to ease the burden on the East German women. As a result of the closing, we women now require more time to do our shopping and have to spend a lot of time waiting in line. Although members of the *Konsum*, many now had to shop in the HO and lose their rebate stamps in the process.⁷⁵⁹

The letter closes with a request for a change in this situation.⁷⁶⁰ This was a clever tactic; it pressured the party to fulfill the resolutions of the women's congress and a very clever way that women drew attention to the state's progressive rhetoric for the purposes of meeting their demands. In a similar vein, James C. Scott writes:

It is the young people, those who display a serious interest in the theoretical foundations of communism and begin immersing themselves in Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, who pose a much greater danger to the régime. The Soviet authorities realize this. A person who takes theory seriously will, sooner or later, begin comparing it with practice, and will end up rejecting one or the other, and, later on, the two of them together. But a person who has not been seduced by the theory will view the practice as a common and immutable evil – one that can be lived with.⁷⁶¹

The women of DFD Group 43 were cleverly using theory as leverage to have the SED fulfill its progressive promises, specifically in this example the resolutions of the Women's Congress. In adopting this approach, they were manipulating the system to their advantage.

The following is a further example of the consumer-tactician. In a sales outlet in Güstrow, a co-operative member and gardener sold 10 KG of plums to the *Konsum* for a predetermined price of 1.50 MdN per KG. That year, there was an overabundance of plums, but this did not impact the fixed sales price. The plums were then immediately put on sale for the

⁷⁵⁸ Felix Mühlberg, *Bürger, Bitten und Behörden: Geschichte der Eingabe in der DDR* (Berlin: K. Dietz, 2004), 199-200.

⁷⁵⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 2531, Eingaben der Bürger, Konsum-Genossenschaftsverband, Leipzig, den 29.1.65.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁶¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 106.

price of thirty pfennigs (cents) per KG. Recognizing this discrepancy between the sales price (1.50 MdN) and the *Konsum*'s selling price (thirty pfennigs), the gardener re-purchased his own plums for a total of three MdN. In so doing, he got his produce back and made a profit of twelve MdN. This is an example of a clever way in which *Konsum* members were able to take advantage of socialist price policies.⁷⁶² This act was individualistic and showed self-interest and might even be described as oppositional, but it did not carry a political element. In this case, the member was both looking after himself and depriving the state of income. In East Germany, these acts – although uncoordinated – were, I suspect, ubiquitous.

The examples of the gardener and the women of DFD Group 43 offer interesting cases of tactics under the East German dictatorship. Through them, it becomes apparent that co-operative members were actually employing a variety of tactics. In respect to these aforementioned cases, the words of historian Alf Lüdtke are particularly appropriate: “whichever way people acted and behaved, they did things ‘their way’ – they concomitantly entertained highly individualized sets of feelings.”⁷⁶³ Esther von Richthofen further points out that “official structures not only imposed control, but that they could also be exploited for their own purposes: [East Germans] could utilize SED rhetoric and force higher ranking cultural functionaries to do things *for* them.”⁷⁶⁴ The command of socialized German discourse or what I have described as East German language or *DDR Deutsch* – delineated and endorsed by the state – defined full participation in East German society, but it was also the prerequisite for becoming a consumer-tactician.⁷⁶⁵

⁷⁶² Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 56.

⁷⁶³ Alf Lüdtke, "Practices of Survival -- Ways of Appropriating 'The Rules': Reconsidering Approaches to the History of the GDR," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalization of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 185.

⁷⁶⁴ Esther von Richthofen, "Communication and Compromise: The Prerequisites for Cultural Participation," in *Power and Society in the GDR, 1961-1979: The "Normalization of Rule"?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 145.

⁷⁶⁵ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 73.

8.2.1. Voluntarism or individualism?

Members often eagerly volunteered to participate at their local *Konsum* outlet and for various *Konsum* political endeavours. For instance, beginning in 1975 members participated in the modernization of the *Konsum* retail outlets. This policy under the slogan: “Do your part! Volunteer for the beautification of our cities and communities! (*Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden – Mach mit!*) cost the *Konsum* thirty-one million MdN.⁷⁶⁶ While this voluntarism had a collective connotation, the advantages were individualistic, because the volunteer was likely able to find out when more interesting items such as bananas had arrived.⁷⁶⁷ This suggests that a citizen’s motivation for volunteering was both in support of co-operative or SED ideology, and to a considerable extent for the attainment of desired products. In other words, this voluntarism was likely a tactic to establish friendly contacts with store personnel, with the potential of gaining privileged access to goods. This type of selective participation neither necessitated open violence against the régime, nor did it require political coordination and organization.⁷⁶⁸

8.2.2. Rebate stamps and the advantages of *Konsum* membership

Every *Konsum* member received a refund on all purchased goods. The percentage of the patronage refund (usually between 1.5 to 3 percent) was determined during the *Konsum*’s General Assembly.⁷⁶⁹ The *Konsum* also offered its members services and rebates and reduced prices in other partner-establishments, such as local hotels, museums, theatres and travel agencies.⁷⁷⁰ Upon entrance into the co-operative organization, the new members (usually

⁷⁶⁶ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 599, Direktive zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen der leitenden Organe in den Konsumgenossenschaften und Konsumgenossenschaftsverbänden der Bezirke, 3.

⁷⁶⁷ Müller, ">>Die ökonomische Qualität war eindeutig<< " 178.

⁷⁶⁸ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 20.

⁷⁶⁹ SWA: U2/SWA 1569/6, Anleitung für den Agitator der Konsumgenossenschaft (date not given), 2.

⁷⁷⁰ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 26-29.

women) were eligible to receive a patronage refund of as much as two to three percent of the *Konsum* turnover. At the end of the year, the co-op earnings were counted and the refunds were distributed. Many families used this extra income to help subsidize their Christmas celebrations.⁷⁷¹ The yearly patronage refund was also a welcome supplement to the family income and was used for the purchase of coal and potatoes over the winter.⁷⁷²

“The rebate stamps (*Rabatt-Marken*) please” was, unsurprisingly, the most commonly used phrase by the consumer at the checkout at the local co-operative; the members often exchanged these stamps at the end of the year in return for goods.⁷⁷³ The small green, blue, red and brown rebate stamps were given in denominations of one, five, ten or fifty MdN. One received the stamps after the presentation of the *Konsum* membership identification to the cashier, but the sales person often knew the customer, so this representation of identification was usually not necessary.⁷⁷⁴ At home, these *Marken* were placed in a small booklet, and at the end of the year they were cashed in at the local co-operative. Generally, the *Konsum* members were avid collectors of rebate stamps, which could be exchanged for products, such as coffee, refrigerators, washing machines, sewing machines, and crafts. In later years, members could even exchange stamps for motor vehicles, jewellery made from precious metals, hand-cut lead crystals, musical instruments, postage stamps, hats, and so on. Every September, 1.5 to 1.7 percent of consumer co-operative profit was used to provide patronage refunds. Per family this amounted to a yearly average of 150 MdN.⁷⁷⁵ Former co-operative member and employee Werner Müller stated in an interview, “in many families, it was a tradition to be a co-operative member. However, many citizens of the former DDR only joined co-operative ranks because of

⁷⁷¹ Merkel, "Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR," 86. Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 150.

⁷⁷² Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 26.

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 27. This rebate-stamp system was still used in Britain in the 1980s.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

the refund. When coal was needed for the winter or potatoes for storage, this extra money was always needed.”⁷⁷⁶

Sabine Hödt remembers her tenth birthday when she was able to start participating in the tradition of collecting refund stamps for her grandmother. On the one hand, Hödt was excited about the refunded amount of money, even though she dreaded the preparatory work. In her words, “prior to the submission of the membership book, every family frantically searched through all their bags, purses and articles of clothing in an effort to track down every last membership stamp. I found it nauseating to have to sort and lick these stamps. Why couldn’t the backside taste like fruit or liquorice? And why did the aftertaste linger like soap?”⁷⁷⁷

Herr Fitzkow stated in an interview that the rebate stamps were particularly important for him and his family and East Germans in general. Normally, they received about 100DM at the end of the year. In fact, one year a mistake was made by the saleswomen, and she gave the Fitzkow family a 600DM patronage refund (*Rückvergütung*). Accordingly, in Fitzkow’s words, “that was a good mistake. We used the money to buy something nice.”⁷⁷⁸ Martin Bergner had and continues to have a strong sense of loyalty with the *Konsum* organization. Bergner, a former member of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Altenburg* and current employee within the *Konsum*, concurred, “The patronage refund was something very important.”⁷⁷⁹

A great number of *Eingaben* written to the *Konsum* stress the value of the rebate and the frustrations about not receiving the expected amount. For instance, in a letter written in 1964, a member complained, “I have been a member of the consumer co-operatives since 1946... but I

⁷⁷⁶ Müller, “>>Die ökonomische Qualität war eindeutig<< ” 177.

⁷⁷⁷ Hödt, “Konsummarken kleben,” 121.

⁷⁷⁸ Author’s interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

⁷⁷⁹ Author’s interview with Martin Bergner, Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

am unable to use *Konsum*-rebate-stamps for the credit payment.”⁷⁸⁰ Another frustrated consumer wrote, “I had been a member of the *Konsum* since 1950. On February 1963, I, along with my husband, bought a radio worth 895 MdN at the *Konsumkaufhaus-Leipzig*. Since I was in a hurry (we didn’t know when the stores closed on Saturdays), I forgot my membership book. I kindly asked for the receipt so I could later claim the rebate stamps. In a rude reply, I was told that I could not claim the stamps... My husband and I were so upset about this incident that we *nearly* decided to give up our *Konsum* membership.”⁷⁸¹ In a further example, a male customer complained via an *Eingabe* to the *Konsum-Fahrzeughaus-Leipzig* (vehicle dealer) that he did not receive any rebate stamps following the purchase of a scooter. This customer was also frustrated that there was only one membership book for himself and his wife, and that this meant that the couple had to carry another piece of identification.⁷⁸² Another customer complained in an *Eingabe* directed to the administration of the *Konsum-Leipzig* about constantly having to carry the membership-book in order to receive rebate stamps.⁷⁸³ The fact that these consumers were willing to take the time to write letters of complaint about having to carry around their membership books indicates that they did so, in spite of the inconvenience. These are just a few examples depicting the importance of rebate stamps for consumers, particularly when it came to larger and more expensive items. The upcoming section will examine the writing of *Eingaben* in more detail.

⁷⁸⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1402, Betr.: *Rückvergütung*, Leipzig, den 17.8.1964.

⁷⁸¹ SWA: U2/SWA 1402, An den Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften Berlin, Delitzsch, den 13.11.63.

⁷⁸² SWA: U2/SWA 1401, *Eingabe*, Leipzig den 4.3.64.

⁷⁸³ SWA: U2/SWA 1401, *Eingabe*, An die Verwaltung der Konsumgenossenschaft der Stadt Leipzig, Leipzig W 31, Industriestr. 85/95 (date not given).

8.3. *Eingaben*: venting and totalitarianism

In February 1953, the régime enacted laws that governed how the various state authorities would respond to the treatment of both oral and written petitions (*Eingaben*).⁷⁸⁴ Customers and workers had the opportunity to direct *Eingaben* to the various administrative levels of the *Konsum*. For instance, the Executive of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* ensured that every member could direct *Eingaben* to its various administrative levels, including individual members of the executive. In fact, the executive guaranteed that letter-writers would receive a written response from them within ten days, and they guaranteed a two-day response for letters written to the lower branches of this organization.⁷⁸⁵

The *Konsum* and the SED used *Eingaben* for the displacement of social tension, for allowing certain things to be said, and for certain forms of social power to be exercised. At times, *Eingaben* consisted of state slogans and promises to force the régime to fulfill its egalitarian ideology, while others contained sarcastic and forceful language and should be interpreted as an avenue for venting. Both, however, demonstrate that citizens were given an outlet, the ability to complain, so they used it. Of course, the letters also demonstrate the totalitarian nature of the DDR. To support this contention, we need to return to a quotation by Hanna Arendt from the introduction: “totalitarian movements are mass-organizations of atomized, isolated individuals.”⁷⁸⁶ Therefore, even the most hard-hitting letters were permitted, since the individuals writing them posed no direct threat to the régime due to the isolation of the letter writer. However, as will be seen later in this section, once the complaints became coordinated, the Stasi would intervene.

⁷⁸⁴ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 153.

⁷⁸⁵ SWA: U2/(SWA 623) 870, Richtlinie über die Ordnung für die Arbeit mit den Eingaben der Bürger in der Verwaltung des KGV Stadt Leipzig, Konsum-Genossenschaftsverband Stadt Leipzig, den 23.6.62, 1-2.

⁷⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: 323.

As people learned the discourse of East German socialism, they began to redirect the party's egalitarian values back at the SED in what Michel Foucault describes as a reverse discourse. To explicate, once an ideological categorisation or norm comes into existence, it is possible to "identity with it, and then defend it, insist on your rights, and join forces with others who feel oppressed by the norm, invoking what Foucault calls a 'reverse discourse' as the basis of resistance to the norm itself."⁷⁸⁷ Similarly, as Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci observed, the dominant must make good on at least some of its promises if it is to gain the support of the lower classes. This requires actual sacrifice and restraint from the dominant groups, which in turn could be exploited and redirected at the ruling power by the subordinate classes.⁷⁸⁸ *Eingaben* reflect Foucault and Gramsci's hypotheses. As some indicate, a class struggle arose from the SED's failure to live up to the implicit promises of its Marxist ideology – that is, by making these humanistic pledges to legitimize its rule, the SED was actually fashioning a weapon to be used by East Germans. Historian Judd Stitzel argues, "by adopting the régime's language in order to ask the state to fulfill official promises and to respect worker-consumers' 'rights,' East Germans reproduced official discourses while practicing a form of self-regulation."⁷⁸⁹ These conclusions are evidenced in the following example. A frustrated *Konsum* customer knowingly used SED language by comparing socialist retail with capitalism. The letter-writer stated:

I bought a TV for 2170DM at the *Konsum* retail outlet 430 on 13 December 1962. However, my personal satisfaction did not last long. A few days later, the original picture tube became defective. This was then replaced on 18 January 1963. In August of this year, this component again needed to be replaced... This type of service has nothing to do with socialism and socialist retail trade. On the contrary, such fraudulent methods remind me of capitalism.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁷ Belsey, *Poststructuralism*: 55.

⁷⁸⁸ Antonio Gramsci, Quintin Hoare, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1971), 161.

⁷⁸⁹ Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 160.

⁷⁹⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1402, An den Vorstand der Konsum Gen. Leipzig, *Betr.*: Fernsehgerät „Staßfurt 53, Leipzig. D.5.10.63.

On the other hand, *Eingaben* also coincide with James C Scott's arguments about grumbling and venting. As will be clearly seen in some of the following letters, day-to-day communication between the party and the subordinates (i.e., consumers) was conducted in a dialogue of grumbling. In the words of Scott, "over time a pattern of muttering may develop that has much of the communicative force of a quite refined language as the timing, tune, and nuances of the complaints become quite definitely understood. This language exists alongside the language of deference without necessarily violating its prescriptions."⁷⁹¹ The SED, for its part, allowed for relative protest against some state authorities (i.e., venting or grumbling). In fact, *Eingaben* may have acted as a kind of safety valve through which the population could vent their frustrations with the régime, without directly challenging the authority of SED rule. Hence, *Eingaben* were instruments of social control – albeit on a limited scale and individually. Scott argues:

The point of grumbling is that it stops short of insubordination – to which it is a prudent alternative. Because the intention of making an explicit statement is denied, the need for a direct reply is also denied: officially, nothing has happened. Looked at from above, the dominant actors have permitted subordinates to grumble providing that they never infringe on the public etiquette of deference. Looked at from below, those with little power have skilfully manipulated the terms of their subordination so as to express their dissent publicly, if cryptically, without ever providing their antagonists with an excuse for a counterblow."⁷⁹²

Similarly, the following *Eingaben* demonstrates that the writers were mostly interested in material incentives and venting:

I don't know how you came up with the name 'Navigation'. Certainly, it was because the name 'Atlantic' was already patented. But, this soap resembles neither. I, therefore, recommend that you patent the name 'Abwasser' (sewage), because it has more in common with your product. For these aforementioned reasons, could you please send

⁷⁹¹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 156.

⁷⁹² Ibid.

me three pieces of higher quality soap or the amount of 2.85 MdN plus one MdN for the postage?⁷⁹³

In another example, the writer expressed his frustration over not being able to get any beer for his vacation. In his words,

We had just come back from our local co-operative store and again the Radeberger beer was only available on ration. After twice waiting in line, there was no more beer. And, after consulting with Frau Reppe, she indicated that no more beer would be available. In your opinion, was a good vacation dependent on beer? Well, I am of the opinion that a good beer was part of a good vacation. Up until a year ago, one could pre-order a case of beer for a holiday, but not anymore. And so, I would like to know if there is still a law for beer allocation. I cannot understand why – forty-four years after the war – I can't get a case of beer. Perhaps this was because of the high-handedness of the co-operative administration. I eagerly anticipate your response.⁷⁹⁴

These examples illustrate that the *Konsum* was an avenue by which the concerns and frustrations of individual members – to some extent – could be vented up the SED's economic hierarchy.

The customers bombarded the state departments and the *Konsum* with protest letters. The *Konsum* soap factory in Riesa (*Konsum-Seifenwerk-Riesa*) was a particularly popular target.⁷⁹⁵

In one such example the writer declared, "dear comrade director! For a Christmas present, I bought my wife a gift package with the soap – Mon bijou – from your factory in order to make her happy. But, when my wife opened and used the soap, it released a smell. At first it was pleasant; an hour later, however, the soap smelled, cleaned, and lathered like spoiled cheese."⁷⁹⁶

Another letter from Rolf Krüger written to the *Konsum-Seifenwerk-Riesa* from 10 November 1989 says:

For years, we've been using this soap and we were completely satisfied with it. It is cheaper than the other products currently available. I wanted to know if the production

⁷⁹³ Unknown, "Aus den Eingaben unsere Bürger: Konsum-Seifenwerk Riesa, An den Direktor " in *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten* ed. Manfred Kirsch (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag 2004), 73.

⁷⁹⁴ Unknown, "Aus den Eingaben unsere Bürger: An Ministerium für Handel und Versorgung " in *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten* ed. Manfred Kirsch (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag 2004), 73.

⁷⁹⁵ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 58.

⁷⁹⁶ Unknown, "Eingaben: Werter Genosse Direktor! ", 74.

of the product has been ceased. If this was the case, this is complete nonsense and the Minister of Trade and Provision should have put an end to this.⁷⁹⁷

In an *Eingaben* from Angelika Grenz, she laments to the *Konsum-Seifenwerk-Riesa* that the soap sold was not practical for children. She also describes how relatives in West Germany were able to send her two children (at the time three and seven years old) superior soap in the shape of small animals. Accordingly, she suggested that the *Konsum-Seifenwerk-Riesa* should undertake soap production in the form of toys.⁷⁹⁸

The *Konsum* received numerous *Eingaben* from members criticizing the shopping experience in consumer co-operative stores and the unavailability of goods. Hanna Kraft, who actually worked in a *Konsum* store in Brodau, wrote an *Eingaben* to an East German television program. In her words, "it was often difficult and based on luck if one was to receive bread on Fridays... The situation was often so bad that a majority of the population had to travel 2.5 km to Zschortau or Delitzsch to do their shopping. We wanted a range of goods that would have allowed all the citizens in Brodau to do their shopping here."⁷⁹⁹ Another anonymous *Eingaben* vented frustration at the régime and the *Konsum* regarding its provision of ice cream. It states:

Among the problems that irritated us the most, the ice cream situation was the worst. The state's offered explanations for these problems were often contradictory and inconsistent and we cannot accept them. Because of this problem, consumer co-operative members were growing angry and beginning to insult the republic.⁸⁰⁰

Customers and employees also complained about the irregular business hours at the co-operative outlets. Grete Schmidt wrote an *Eingaben* in Markleeberg on 28 March 1989. The letter stated, "The co-operative store in which new goods were received was closed for either the

⁷⁹⁷ AKB: *Eingaben*, Bandnummer 2 1989/90 2038/77, November 10, 1989: Seife "Rose von Florens".

⁷⁹⁸ Grenz, "Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation," 193-94.

⁷⁹⁹ Hanna Kraft, "Eingaben: JE NACH BELIEBEN -- Brodau, den 4. Januar 1987," in *"Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation": Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR*, ed. Ina Merkel (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2000), 192-93.

⁸⁰⁰ "Eingaben: Auf Gnade Angewiesen – Verkaufsstellenausschuß, Dummerstorf, den 27. Juni 1989," in *"Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation": Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR*, ed. Ina Merkel (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2000), .

entire morning or afternoon. Because of the enormous line-ups, it was very difficult to discover new shoe models.”⁸⁰¹ An *Eingaben* written by Hanna Kraft from 4 January 1987 describes her experience with working at the local co-operative store and its constantly changing working hours in Brodau (part of the city Delitzsch with approximately 500 inhabitants):

I was employed at the co-operative store until August. The hours of operation at this co-operative store were a complete catastrophe. The opening times were the following: Monday and Friday 9am to 2pm, Tuesday 9am to 3pm, Wednesday 9am to 1pm and 2pm to 3pm, Thursday 9am to 4pm. When I stopped working there as a saleswoman, the hours of operation again changed: daily from 9am to 2:30pm. After fourteen days, we determined that this was too long, so on Wednesday the hours of operation changed to 10am to 2:30pm. When something came up, the store was often closed at 12pm. The majority of workingwomen could not leave their jobs until 4pm, so they could not shop in Brodau. We want a co-operative that will have consistent hours of operation for employees and consumers from 9am to 1pm and 3pm to 6pm, so that all the citizens in Brodau can do their shopping here.⁸⁰²

These letters expressed to the party that their loyalty was contingent upon the SED fulfilling its promise of an abundant provision of commodities. Through these letters, consumers were attempting to forge a contract with the state in which material prosperity would be a significant prerequisite for state legitimacy and the loyalty of the citizenry.⁸⁰³ In other words, consumer-tacticians were able to demand that the party provide higher quality consumer goods and make economic adjustments to satisfy their needs and demands. By writing these letters in either socialist discourse or direct and often sarcastic language, they were making the most of their situation by exploiting the rules of the game and manipulating the system to their “minimum disadvantage.”⁸⁰⁴ To put it another way, consumers or petitioners were attempting to pressure the party to bestow the commodity the individual desired. This was, at times,

⁸⁰¹ Grete Schmidt, "Eingaben: Wie so oft mit Sack und Pack, Markleeberg, den 28. März 1989," in *"Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation": Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR*, ed. Ina Merkel (Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2000), 270.

⁸⁰² Kraft, "Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation," 192.

⁸⁰³ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand,'" 250.

⁸⁰⁴ Hobsbawm, "Peasants and politics," 13.

accomplished by echoing the party's own language, thereby "encoding" their individual pursuit of goods in the politicized language of Soviet-style socialism. Life in the DDR and personal satisfaction, therefore, required one to develop creative strategies to manipulate the system. Those individuals who were able to adjust their stance to the necessity of the given context of the DDR's socialist dictatorship maximized opportunities in the overtly politicized sphere of consumption in the DDR. Since the sphere of consumption was a junction in which the state and the citizenry met, these *Eingaben* demonstrate how individuals learned to employ multiple tactics to maximize their exploitation of the system, while, on account of the atomization of the letter writer, not directly challenging the rule and hegemony of the SED.

While the SED created the scenarios for the performance of conformity and support, it was clear that most East Germans were only going through the motions and were in fact not invested in the performance. Scott illustrates an example of such behaviour when speaking of motorists and pedestrians:

The traffic light changes when a pedestrian is halfway across the intersection. As long as the pedestrian is not in imminent danger from the oncoming traffic, a small dramatization is likely to ensue. He lifts his knees a bit higher for a step or two, simulating haste, thereby implicitly recognizing the motorist's right-of-way. In fact, in nearly all cases, if my impression is correct, the *actual* progress of the pedestrian across the intersection is no faster than it would have been if he had simply proceeded at his original pace. What is conveyed is the *impression* of compliance without its substance.⁸⁰⁵

If the opposite occurs and the pedestrian openly refuses to make the appearance of haste or, even worse, slows down, then a direct defiance of the motorist's right to the road has occurred (i.e., the symbolic order has been breached and challenged). By directly defying the motorist, the pedestrian is announcing his right to the road and a game of "chicken" would most likely ensue in which the pedestrian is at a serious disadvantage.⁸⁰⁶ If the East German was in the presence of

⁸⁰⁵ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*: 26.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid.

party officials or the secret police, it was necessary that the performance maintain the minimal standards of conformity and state loyalty; otherwise the SED's authority would have been challenged. Like the driver from Scott's analogy, the party and state held a clear advantage in resources over the average East German citizen. For that reason, the performance would at least appear to be more genuine in the presence of the Stasi than perhaps in the company of trusted acquaintances. These *Eingaben* were a similar performance; they illustrated an impression of compliance while venting anger at the state and demanding that it fulfill its promises of socialist consumer abundance.

Nevertheless, the following is an example in which these demands and complaints exceeded the accepted limits – that is, when they became coordinated and group-orientated the state perceived them as a challenge to its authority and subsequently intervened. On 17 June 1988, for instance, the administration of *Konsum* retail outlet 306 Ebersbach (a small city in Saxony just north of the Czech border) submitted a complaint letter entitled “*Eingabe* to the council to the district of Löbau and the department of Trade and Provision.” This protest letter drew the direct attention of the Stasi functionaries in Dresden. Given the urgency of the supply situation, Hans Modrow, the high-ranking First Secretary of the SED of the *Bezirk* Administration in Dresden, was also notified. The letter stated, “For months the supply of fruit and vegetables in the co-operative retail outlet in Ebersbach was miserable. There were never any cauliflower, tomatoes, and cucumbers for sale, and the selection of fruit was also meagre. Since this co-operative retail outlet was the only available option for shopping in the area, we requested a quick change to these conditions.”⁸⁰⁷ Since forty-eight citizens signed this *Eingabe*, the Stasi was alarmed, resulting in the identification of the signatures and the examination of the facts and circumstances surrounding the writing of this letter. In the end, the examination did not

⁸⁰⁷ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 20544, Dresden, 4. Juli 1988, 64.

produce what the Stasi might have perceived as evidence of “enemy activity,” but the secret police force was distressed by the general and growing frustration with the supply problems in Ebersbach.⁸⁰⁸

Historian Paul Betts suggests that by the early 1980s collectively written *Eingaben*, such as the preceding example, reflected an emerging public sphere and the growing confidence of the citizenry to demand justice. To use his words, “a revealing marker of change was that signatories were less apprehensive about preserving their anonymity in more politically oriented, collectively written *Eingaben*.”⁸⁰⁹ Indeed, the rules of DDR language had changed by the late 1980s when the end of the régime was in sight. This Stasi document further demonstrates a few other important particularities. The Stasi paid close attention to *Eingaben* and the mood of the population in relation to consumption. Furthermore, there were, as Foucault would remind us, concrete boundaries to what could be said in *Eingaben*.⁸¹⁰ It seems as though the letter writer of this *Eingabe* and those who signed it overstepped the limits of acceptable protest by coordinating a group protest letter. This suggests that atomized complaint was allowed, but coordinated group protests were not.

As the years progressed, the number, the harshness, and the directness of the *Eingaben* increased. By the time the régime collapsed, there were millions of *Eingaben* in the party and state archives. There were so many that each and every East German could have written at least one *Eingabe* in the course his or her life. During Honecker’s rule, the majority of these letters were sent to higher levels of government in order to express their anger directly at officials. It should be noted, however, that *Eingaben* sometimes led to effective results and improvements.

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁰⁹ Paul Betts, *Within Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 189-90.

⁸¹⁰ Foucault, “Discourse on Language,” 149.

Then again, inefficiencies of the planned economy could not ultimately meet the increasing demands of East Germans.⁸¹¹ Nevertheless, the state did try.

8.4. The state and *Konsum* monitor and try to improve consumption

The state's persistent efforts to satisfy and respond to these *Eingaben* and consumer demands resulted in dedicating ever more resources to consumption.⁸¹² The inadequate supply of the rural population with consumer goods was a recurrent topic of discussion at Politburo meetings, trade conferences, and discussions of the Department of Trade and Provision.⁸¹³ In fact, the *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in der DDR* (an official East German publication) let East Germans know that "the party charged co-operatives with continually improving the material conditions in the co-operative stores through socialist rationalisation."⁸¹⁴ The Ministry of Trade and Provision assigned *Konsum* sales clerks the tasks of polling customers. In plain language, women responded to this polling by demanding vacuum cleaners, ovens, washing machines, blenders, toasters, and so on. Clerks then relayed this information upward through the planning hierarchy until it ended up at the Planning Commission.⁸¹⁵ The fact that the state and the Stasi were reacting to consumer complaints is indication that the régime responded to pressures from below and that there was some degree of government accountability.

The *Konsum* knew that shortages undermined its propaganda and agitation campaigns. Here is what the *Konsum* propagandists said about this: "shortages can be criticized and they had

⁸¹¹ Schütterle, *Klassenkampf im Kaufhaus*: 48.

⁸¹² Port, *Conflict and Stability*: 4.

⁸¹³ Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 199.

⁸¹⁴ Becher, Mand, and Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft der DDR., *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in der DDR: Massenorganisationen, Verbände, Vereinigungen, Gesellschaften, Genossenschaften, Komitees, Ligen*: 106.

⁸¹⁵ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 188.

to be overcome as quickly as possible. What we promised had to be real and fulfilled.”⁸¹⁶ Furthermore, the SED also knew that its power to shape compliance rested just as much on the small things of everyday consumption in the *Konsum* retail outlets as on the major political initiatives of social engineering. It was through the provision of commodities that the SED tried to convince East Germans that their state was worth having and keeping.⁸¹⁷ Accordingly, the SED recognized the frustration of consumers and attempted to improve consumption. This suggests that the story of SED rule and its attempted totalitarianism is more complicated than one of pure repression: it demonstrates that the state worked to provide for its citizens’ wishes to some extent.

In the 1950s, there was also a shift from the distribution of rationed goods (*verteilen*) to the creation of a new culture of selling (*verkaufen*), which was heralded as a sign of the growing normality of the economic and political status quo in the DDR. In the *Konsum*, this shift was marked by improving the shopping experience of customers through a broader selection of goods, a more pleasant atmosphere, modern advertising techniques (for example fashion shows) and displays of goods next to the cash register for impulse-purchases. There was also a name change in the *Konsum* members’ magazine from *Die Konsumverteilungsstelle* (the *Konsum* Distribution Outlet) to *Die Konsumverkaufsstelle* (the *Konsum* Retail Outlet). The VDK justified this name change to signify a shift from distribution and rationing to retail and consumerism. This shift also marked a change in the relationship between the customer and salesperson in which the *Konsum* worker was no longer merely a distributor of goods, but a “friend and advisor” who was helping construct a more enjoyable and functional consumer culture.⁸¹⁸ Historian Katherine Pence states that “the transition from “distributing” to “selling” was largely

⁸¹⁶ SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 4.

⁸¹⁷ Kaminsky, "Einkaufsbeutel und Bückware," 248.

⁸¹⁸ Pence, "'You as a Woman Will Understand'," 223.

associated with a shift from the crisis years of rationing to a return to postwar normality. In order to make amends for the actual continuation of rationing and to renew an image of a return to normality and prosperity, the trade organizations and ministries began to promote this new focus on selling.”⁸¹⁹ This served dual purposes: it was a shift in consumption but also a political campaign that attempted to express to consumers how the command economy was capable of assuaging needs and desires.

In 1957, the secretary of the Consumer Co-operative Leipzig (*Konsumgenossenschaft-Stadt-Leipzig*) received over 441 written complaints, which was a substantial increase from 347 in the previous year; there were numerous verbal complaints as well. According to the written complaints, customers were particularly frustrated whenever there were shortages of specific goods, namely coffee, tropical fruits, chocolate, radios, and televisions. Eighty-one of the 441 complaints were directed at the sales personnel and customers, venting about what they perceived as unfriendly service and “snotty,” impolite treatment. The lack of sales personnel was also criticized, since this created significant delays and queuing. Forty-nine complaints were concerned with spoiled potatoes and by extension the quality of their storage. Another twenty-seven complaints dealt with the provision of milk and cheese, and there were twenty-two *Eingaben* about the hygiene in the retail outlets. The secretary of the co-operatives took these complaints seriously and demanded that the sales staff take educational courses on consumer culture, sales service, and hygiene.⁸²⁰ For these reasons, the *Konsum* invested considerable resources in improving shopping conditions in its retail outlets. In 1957, it invested 40,000 DM in the modernization (primarily the development of self-service stores) of its current stores and 78,000 for the establishment of new retail outlets. An additional sum of 200,000 DM was

⁸¹⁹ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 425.

⁸²⁰ SWA: U2/(SWA 530)I/108, Bericht über die Bearbeitung von Beschwerden und Kritiken 1. Jahre 1957, Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig – Vorstandssekretariat, 1-3.

invested in renovating another 100 retail outlets. A further 67,000 was invested in refrigeration systems. Knowing that consumption reflected the general state of socialism and the command economy, the goal was – as always – to demonstrate to members and customers the growing strength of the socialist economy and the abundant consumer culture it provided.⁸²¹

While rationing had been replaced by subsidizing by 1958, shortages and price-controls continued to frustrate consumers. The prices for basic foodstuffs, such as butter, meat, rye bread, baked goods, and fish in the *Konsum* stores, as well as the cost for rents, electricity, and public transportation, were heavily subsidized by the government. These goods, moreover, were sold well below their actual costs. In contrast, retail and industrial goods (i.e., cars, televisions, refrigerators, and textiles) were sold at prices that far exceeded their production costs. Furthermore, East Germans paid significantly more for *Genussmittel* (coffee, tea, alcohol, and tobacco) than West Germans due in part to the limited purchasing power of the East German currency (*Marken der deutsche Notenbank*, MdN). The state imposed high taxes on these goods to offset the cost of subsidized foodstuffs, rents, and public transportation. During the economic crisis of 1960-61, the deteriorating supply situation – particularly the lack of meat, sausages, butter, cheese, shoes, underwear, and washing powder – affected the entire population and in many cases convinced a not insignificant number of people that it was time to leave the DDR.⁸²² Again, the state was fully aware of this and was persistently monitoring the population's consumption.

In 1961, the *Konsum* tried to improve consumption by providing its workforce with a number of publications defining ways in which sales staffs were to deal with a wide range of customers. According to one such publication, the majority of the shoppers in the *Konsum* stores

⁸²¹ SWA: U2/SWA 2341/2, Referat zum 12. Jahrestag der Gründung der Konsumgenossenschaften am 18.12.1957, 8.

⁸²² Steiner, "Dissolution of the "Dictatorship over Needs"?, " 170.

were women and they were apparently more critical than men, especially non-working women who had more time to select and contemplate the purchase of goods. Also, women were responsible for the household budget and were careful when spending money, whereas men were supposedly less concerned with price and more easily persuaded than women. Additionally, the document described methods for dealing with a wide variety of customers, such as the talkative customer, the quiet customer, the nervous customer, the slow customer, the undecided customer, the decided customer, the grumbler, the mistrustful customer, the trusting customer, and the experienced customer. Generally, the most experienced – and perhaps challenging – customer was the housewife due to her supposedly superior knowledge of consumer culture. When dealing with the experienced and housewifely customer, *Konsum* sales-staff were instructed to speak only in language appropriate for the personality and sex of the given customer.⁸²³



Illustration 39: *Konsum* education material from the early 1960s portraying saleswomen serving the taciturn (*schweigsam*) and “nit-picky” *Nörgler* customer⁸²⁴

8.4.1. The Stasi conflates consumption with national security

The Stasi understood that consumption shortages undermined support for the East German state. Remember, *Konsum* propagandists said, “What we promised had to be real and

⁸²³ AKB: Werben und Verkaufen, von Redseligen, Schweigsamen, und Anderen Kunden, Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften - Berufsausbildung, Nummer 5, 1961, 5-13.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 7-10.

fulfilled.”⁸²⁵ The Stasi, therefore, linked consumption with national security, and it was compelled to intervene whenever the population grew too dismayed over shortages because it understood (correctly) that its power to shape compliance rested just as much on the small things of everyday consumption in the *Konsum* retail outlets as on the major political initiatives. On a macro level, this sub-section will examine the correlation between consumerism and national security. On a micro level, it illustrates that the Stasi had considerable influence on the *Konsum* and almost unfettered access to spy on its employees and members.

The Stasi operated a division for the “protection of the economy” known as Department XVIII.⁸²⁶ The Stasi’s Department XVIII was perhaps the singular body that was most able to intervene in the East German economy. It provided the muscle to ensure that the party’s economic decrees were enforced. During the initial years of the fledgling East German state, this included the removal of small, private businesses, forcing the farmers onto collective farms, and staging show trials in rural villages.⁸²⁷ According to historian John C. Schmeidel, economic industries “viewed the Stasi as the godfather, the well connected fixer that could overcome by its clout the shortages, the ‘plan mentality’ that punished good results by imposing higher norms after a good year, the favouritism, and the misallocation of resources that have distinguished command economies since the Russian Revolution.”⁸²⁸ The *Konsum*, therefore, may have welcomed the infiltration of Department XVIII due to its ability to provide leverage over competing industries and allocate resources in the shortage economy of the DDR.

It was common for Department XVIII to imbed informants (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, **IMs**) into sensitive industrial and economic areas. While Stasi officers were usually open about their

⁸²⁵ SWA: U2/I/58, Richtlinien für die Agitationsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 1952, 4.

⁸²⁶ Kristie Macrakis, *Seduced by Secrets: Inside the Stasi's Spy-Tech World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), 16.

⁸²⁷ John C. Schmeidel, *Stasi: Shield and Sword of the Party* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 18-19.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

profession and status, IMs worked secretly within the *Konsum* and only the Stasi recruiters knew their identities. The informants often held a few primary roles in the *Konsum*: spying on colleagues and reporting on the morale of the workforce. From the information gathered by these informants, the Stasi and its informants made weekly reports written from their vantage points within *Konsum* stores. These reports were then used as an instrument to monitor how consumption was having an impact on the mood of the population.⁸²⁹

The cases explored in this sub-section demonstrate the considerable efforts the IMs undertook to gather information about the everyday consuming practices of East German citizens. For example, the supply report from Potsdam's *Konsum* outlet for the week of 7 March to 13 March 1986 indicated that the quality of goods failed to satisfy consumers. In turn, the *Konsum*'s management reported that they were only able to make a limited amount of meat and poultry products available to consumers.⁸³⁰ Officials were alarmed by the provisional report from the week of 6 June 1986 to 12 June 1986. The report indicated that there were considerable quality control problems. More troublingly, the delivery of bread to the *Konsum* retail outlets 309, 315, and 316 did not take place on schedule. Consequently, the customers were burdened with having to make two or three trips to their respective retail outlet in order to pick up the most basic of foodstuffs; not surprisingly, they blamed the sales staff for the unavailable products which led to unpleasant exchanges and arguments.⁸³¹

Historian Eli Rubin notes that the Stasi was alarmed by the growing confidence of consumers and identified those who were not shopping in mainstream shops (i.e., *Konsum* type stores). The Stasi considered these people to be "outsiders" and thus worth putting under

⁸²⁹ Bruce, *The Firm*: 14.

⁸³⁰ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam, KD OR 766 Bd.4, Versorgungsbericht für die Woche vom 7.3. - 13.3.1986, 66-67.

⁸³¹ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam, KD OR 766 Bd.4, Versorgungsbericht für die Woche vom 6.6 - 12.6.1986, 104-05.

surveillance. To make this argument, Rubin uses the case of Angela, who, after 1989, discovered that the Stasi kept a file on her. The informer (one of her neighbours) noted her selection of wood and antique furniture instead of the ubiquitous East German plastics. For the Stasi, this was unequivocal evidence that Angela was not the “average” consumer; therefore, she was described as “different, suspicious, and worth watching carefully.”⁸³² The example that Rubin presents can be more broadly contextualized within the framework of this dissertation. For instance, the Stasi defended the consumers who used products that were in accordance with the socialist aesthetic, but was suspicious of those who did not conform, thereby elevating consumption to a matter of national security.⁸³³

The Stasi took the president of the VDK to task over the provision problems. It was monitoring citizens’ frustration with and criticisms of the range of goods in the *Konsum* stores, and the Stasi became acutely aware of the inadequate quality of meat and sausages. Customers particularly complained about the high salt content, freshness, the insufficient shelf life, and the rapid discoloration of meat products.⁸³⁴ As a result, the president had to inform the Council of Ministers of the DDR about the shortages, as well as the plans and designs for the modernization and reconstruction of the consumer co-operative meat processing industries to quell consumer demand and frustration.⁸³⁵ Above all, what the Stasi wanted from the *Konsum* was a “yardstick” by which to measure how the supply situation was impacting the mood of the population.⁸³⁶ In this context, the Stasi – the world-renowned infamous secret police and intelligence service –

⁸³² Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism*: 281.

⁸³³ East German authorities were also suspicious of youth in jeans. While youth saw jeans as a symbol of rebellion and freedom, the Stasi perceived this consumer product as derisory Western influence. According to Rebecca Menzel, “jeans in the DDR were not just pants – they were an attitude!” Rebecca Menzel, *Jeans in der DDR: vom tieferen Sinn einer Freizeithose*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Berlin: Links, 2004), 8.

⁸³⁴ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 21122, Bericht über Kontrollergebnisse zur Sicherung der Qualität Struktur von Fleisch- und Wurstwaren im Grundsortiment (date not given - probably late 1980s), 138.

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 145.

⁸³⁶ Kurzer, “Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR,” 815.

became something of consumer advocate and played the role of liaison between consumers and the *Konsum*.

The Stasi was able to wield a big stick to make an organization as large as the *Konsum* work better for consumers. The Stasi was monitoring citizens' frustration with and criticisms of the range of goods in *Konsum* stores and became acutely aware of the inadequate quality of meat and sausages. Customers particularly complained about the high salt content, freshness, the insufficient shelf life, and the rapid discoloration of these meat products.⁸³⁷ As a result, the president of the *Konsum* had to inform the Council of Ministers of the DDR about the shortages, as well as the plans and designs for the modernization and reconstruction of the consumer co-operative meat processing industries to quell consumer demand and frustration.⁸³⁸ Above all, what the Stasi wanted from the *Konsum* was a "yardstick" by which to measure how the supply situation was impacting the mood of the population and the stability of the East German state.⁸³⁹ In this context, the Stasi – the world-renowned infamous secret police and intelligence service – became something of a consumer advocate and played the role of liaison between consumers and the *Konsum*.

8.5. Conclusions

While some of the previous chapters described the ways in which the SED manipulated the *Konsum* to its political advantage, this chapter describes the ways in which East Germans communicated with the state. This chapter has shown that *Eingaben* were an avenue for some level of negotiation with the régime. Yet, there was a tension between the aspirations of the state's totalitarian ambitions and individuals choosing from a range of available options between

⁸³⁷ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS-ZAIG 21122, Bericht über Kontrollergebnisse zur Sicherung der Qualität Struktur von Fleisch- und Wurstwaren im Grundsortiment (date not given - probably late 1980s), 138.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁸³⁹ Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR," 815.

conformity and resistance so as to express and, at times, assert their own interests. As members learned the rules of the game, they began to exploit the co-operative retail system. This was not so much resisting or complying – rather it was individuals participating in the co-operative and socialist systems, while not necessarily sharing the state’s goals. In other words, these members could not help but participate in the system; however, their participation was often based on gaining an advantage at the expense of the state.

The *Konsum* largely, though not completely, failed to contribute to a satisfactory consumption experience. The East German consumer, who judged consumption in the DDR in comparison to the West, was recurrently disappointed with the state controlled consumer culture of the DDR. The East German consumer also seemed to ignore and devalue the benefits of subsidized and price-controlled consumption in the *Konsum* retail stores. The continual economic shortages and the minimal purchasing power of the MdN led to an undermining of confidence in the DDR’s and the *Konsum*’s retail system. Zatlin thus argues, “it was these shortages of economic and ethical goods – the absence of key commodities and social equality – that fuelled the political unrest that breached the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989.”⁸⁴⁰ Stitzziel echoes this argument: “East German citizens ultimately judged the achievements of socialism not by officials’ theories or images of consumer goods but rather by what they could actually purchase in stores.”⁸⁴¹

The examples of *Eingaben* presented in this chapter reveal that consumption was the critical junction and an avenue of communication in the relationship between the Stasi and society in East Germany. Because the *Konsum* failed to deliver an abundant supply of quality consumer products, the Stasi understood that it was perpetually delivering the wrong message to

⁸⁴⁰ Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 11-13.

⁸⁴¹ Stitzziel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 74.

consumers, namely that the command economy could never function as well as West Germany's market economy. Economic shortages ultimately contributed to East Germans opting for the West German consumer model in 1989. Ironically, it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall – when prices of once subsidized basic commodities drastically increased – that East Germans began to appreciate the elements and subsidies of their command economy and now extinct socialist consumer culture.⁸⁴²

⁸⁴² Ibid., 179.

9. Working in the *Konsum*: identity, memory, and “democracy”

Preparations are being made to introduce women to co-operative administrative work and for women to be elected to the *Aufsichtsrat*.

- Comrade Eckstein, 1946⁸⁴³

The new elections of the *Konsum* had to be used to overcome ideological weaknesses and to create clarity about the leading role of the party within the co-operatives.

- Archival Document from 1957⁸⁴⁴



Illustration 40: The predominantly female *Konsum* staff (date unknown – likely the 1950s)



Illustration 41: The predominantly female *Konsum* staff (date unknown – likely the 1950s)⁸⁴⁵

⁸⁴³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, 6.6.1947, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker An Gen. Eckstein, Landesvorstand Thüringen, Weimar, geschrieben von H. Lehmann, 46.

⁸⁴⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given), 12.

⁸⁴⁵ SSC: 30878/1124, Berufsausbildung/Qualifizierung, Um- und Anlernlinge (Date not given - likely the 1950s).

Female labour was urgently needed because of the postwar population demographic in the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany. In 1946, of a total population of nineteen million in the SBZ, women of working age (fifteen to sixty) outnumbered their male counterparts by nearly three million.⁸⁴⁶ Therefore, female participation in the workforce was not only politically and ideologically motivated (see introduction), but it was also driven by (demographic) economic necessity.⁸⁴⁷ Women's strength in numbers forced the German communists to garner their support as potential workers.⁸⁴⁸ Therefore, to fulfill economic plans, increase productivity, and raise the standard of living, women were required to participate in the production process.⁸⁴⁹ For this reason, the July 1948 edition of the co-operative newspaper *Konsum: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt* promoted the notion that “*Frauenarbeit* [women meeting the obligations of their professional work and societal duties in combination with motherhood] was especially demanded and supported.”⁸⁵⁰

This chapter considers participation (mostly female) in the *Konsum* workforce and the ways in which work was politicized in *Konsum* factories and retail outlets. In spite of state incursion into this realm, there was rudimentary democracy at the lower level of the East German co-operatives. That is to say, the remarkable and significant factor about state involvement in the *Konsum* was the manner in which totalitarian indoctrination (presumably negative) became intertwined with what could be interpreted as nascent gender equality in East Germany (presumably positive).

⁸⁴⁶ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 82.

⁸⁴⁷ Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR*: 32.

⁸⁴⁸ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 20.

⁸⁴⁹ Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR*: 32.

⁸⁵⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt Juli 1948, Juli 1948/Nr.1, 118.

9.1. Women in the *Konsum* workforce

Women primarily occupied East German consumer co-operatives: female staff and female shoppers. Indeed, one party functionary referred to co-operatives as “women-dominated spaces.”⁸⁵¹ Seeing that the employees in the local stores and the majority of the consumers were women, the SED recognized the potential of the *Konsum* to serve as ideal places to garner female support for the party.⁸⁵² On 9 November 1946, Paul Merker, a KPD and later SED functionary, reported to Max Fechner, minister of justice of the DDR, “that women were a primary concern for the *Konsum* and were being actively recruited into the organization. Women should exclusively occupy the sales positions in the outlet stores and spread the ideology of the co-operative movement to the general public.”⁸⁵³ Of course, mention should be made that men also worked as salespeople in the *Konsum*, although this was usually in the technological sales departments in the larger department stores.⁸⁵⁴

As we have seen, the administration of the *Konsum* was given the direct task of politically mobilising its workforce in support of the SED and its policies. Similar to the *Konsum* schools and co-operative education, the party and the VDK attempted to use employment in the *Konsum* to increase “socialist consciousness” amongst its predominantly female workforce.⁸⁵⁵ According to a commonly used slogan in the co-operative newspaper *KONSUM*, “Women had to be bearers of the co-operative movement.”⁸⁵⁶ At a meeting of the Central Committee of the SED in mid-1947, a party member pronounced, “consumer co-

⁸⁵¹ Fairbairn, “Co-operative Values and the Cold War,” 13.

⁸⁵² Ibid.

⁸⁵³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, *Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED*, 20.

⁸⁵⁴ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁸⁵⁵ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 179.

⁸⁵⁶ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. *KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt* Juli 1948, Juli 1948/Nr.1, 115.

operatives were a tool for the political mobilization of its female employees.”⁸⁵⁷ To accomplish this, every worker had to attend co-operative meetings, make political and ideological contributions to the movement, and act in accordance with SED-influenced co-operative statutes.⁸⁵⁸ As a result, the party heavily influenced the *Konsum*, but state-intervention also forced it to increase the role of female workers in its administrative branches, since the *Konsum* had to conduct itself in accordance with the progressive and modern aspects of SED ideology. Acting on behalf of the SED and its efforts to indoctrinate women, Helmut Lehmann, a member of the SED-Politburo, gave the following instructions to the *Konsum* on 13 November 1946:

The co-operative movement had been given a decisive role to fill with women, particularly housewives. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to implement the formation of housewife-committees in every sales-outlet. From these committees, propagandists for the co-operative movement had to emerge from the female ranks. With the aim of spreading party and co-operative ideology, the posts of the sub-party-organizations as well as the committees of the co-operative system had to be primarily filled with women. In order for the party and the co-operatives to become successful, they had to ensure that women participated in public life. We had to ensure that our ideology spread to women, so that they were not confined to the narrow realms of their families, but that they also offered their services to the wider community.⁸⁵⁹

There were instances in which women were able to attain high managerial positions within the *Konsum*. In a letter addressed on behalf of the *Konsum* to the International Co-operative Women's Guild in London dated 23 July 1946, Emmy Freundlich, a famous social democrat and co-operator from the prewar years, stresses that “with great pleasure, we elected a woman to the position of president of the supervisory committee of the consumer co-operatives. Frau Lodahl was the first woman to be elected to this position.”⁸⁶⁰ The letter continues with

⁸⁵⁷ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 23.

⁸⁵⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. 30. December, 1946, für Gen. Lehmann Frage einer Zentralstelle für die Konsumgenossenschaften, 37.

⁸⁵⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. November 13, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED written by Helmut Lehmann, 22-23.

⁸⁶⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/113, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Abschrift. International Co-operative Women's Guild, an Sekretärin Mrs. Theo Maftel, von Vorsitzende Frau Emmy Freundlich (Date not given), 79

Freundlich stating “women within the co-operatives played a decisive role in the reconstruction of German political and economic life. The more women were able to receive working positions within the co-operatives, the easier it was to include them in the political structures of the embryonic socialist state.”⁸⁶¹ According to an interview with Martin Bergner, a former *Konsum* economist, “throughout the history of the *Konsum* there were no differences in the roles between men and women in the *Konsum*. In fact, women were actively involved in leadership roles and the administration.”⁸⁶²

Further evidence suggests that the *Konsum* made an official effort to include women in upper level positions and to combat traditional gender stereotypes about women in the workforce. A report from 25 June 1948 suggests that Herr Lehmann wanted the regional executive of the *Konsum* in Thuringia to implement a resolution compelling women to join the co-operative administration.⁸⁶³ During a co-operative conference held in Erfurt on 31 May 1947, it was determined that a number of comrades held a negative view about the inclusion of women in the *Konsum* hierarchy. As a consequence, the state, or more specifically the SED Central Committee, intervened on behalf of women and supported the possibility of only women being allowed to fill the supervisory committee of the Thuringian co-operatives. The archival document states:

To combat the negative attitude towards women, a large portion of progressively minded co-operative members supported the option to fill Thuringia’s co-operative *Aufsichtsrat* [supervisory committee] only with women. In the *Konsumgenossenschaftsverband-Sachsen-Anhalt*, two women were already elected to the *Aufsichtsrat*. It was also suggested that in the future female co-operative leaders would have a voice in the *Vorstand* [executive].⁸⁶⁴

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 79-80.

⁸⁶² Author’s interview with Martin Bergner, Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

⁸⁶³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, Landesvorstand Thüringen, Weimar, 25.6.1948, Gegenagitation der Gen. Emma Sachse gegen die Konsumgenossenschaften, 112-13.

⁸⁶⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Berlin, dem 3. Juni 1947. Bericht über den Verbandstag des Verbandes Thüringer Konsumgenossenschaften G.m.b.H., Erfurt, am 31.5.1947, 6-7.

While *Konsum* documents illustrate the goal to include women in administrative posts, women were still underrepresented in positions garnering high social status, such as factory and other government-run industry directors and high-ranking posts within the party. Generally, the SED discriminated against women, regardless of their qualifications or training. Still, one third of all managerial positions in East Germany were occupied by women, though these were lower- and mid-level managerial positions. For example, women in the plants were seldom top administrators, and there were only four female directors or in this context *Direktorinnen* in the entire DDR. The women who attained management positions were often in charge of smaller factories with fewer than 500 employees.⁸⁶⁵ Fairbairn maintains that women were prominent in the lower administrative levels of the *Konsum*, but were often unable to attain high-level managerial or decision-making roles.⁸⁶⁶ However, the *Konsum* may not have reflected the wider pattern of female employment in the DDR. From archival sources, a diverging picture emerges in which the VDK was actively recruiting and funnelling women into its administrative branches. This point is illustrated by VDK president Gerhard Lucht's August 1959 letter to the Department of Trade and Provision demanding, "The re-election of the organs of the VDK ensure an increased number of women in the leading organs of the VDK."⁸⁶⁷

I could not find archival statistics comparing female East German employment with employment from other co-operative institutions in the West. Nevertheless, there were numerous individual cases of women gaining high administrative posts in the *Konsum* and actually maintaining these positions after the *Wende* and into the present-day. In 1984, Sigrid

⁸⁶⁵ Dagmar Langenhan and Sabine Roß, "The Socialist Glass Ceiling: Limits to Female Careers," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 182.

⁸⁶⁶ Fairbairn, "Co-operative Values and the Cold War," 14.

⁸⁶⁷ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. August 8, 1959 recommendations written by Gerhard Lucht, president of the VdK, entitled Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung, Durchführung und Auswertung des IV. Genossenschaftstages, 11.

Hebestreit, at twenty-years-old, became the youngest ever-elected chairwoman of a DDR consumer co-operative at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Weimar*. At that time, this co-operative had 1,200 employees, 368 stores, and 100 restaurants.⁸⁶⁸ Under the leadership of Hebestreit, this co-operative continues to be important for the city of Weimar by employing 710 people and providing for 6,293 members.⁸⁶⁹ According to Christa Paetow and Gesa Schwertfeger, “men – under orders from the party – were prevalent in the executives of the *Konsum*, yet we were able to become members of the administration of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Hagenow* in 1988.”⁸⁷⁰ Three years later, in 1991, these women emerged as top executives of this co-operative; it is now an important employer in the region with 9,374 members and a yearly turnover rate of twenty-four million Euros.⁸⁷¹ At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Haldensleben*, Petra Woege was elected to the administrative branch shortly before the *Wende*. In 1995, she became the chairwomen of this co-operative, with 177 employees (156 of whom are women) and a yearly financial turnover rate of fifty million Euros.⁸⁷²

The consumer co-operatives were to be a working environment in which women had the opportunity to develop practical work experience. The best among the female employees were to be incorporated into management and administration.⁸⁷³ However, by guaranteeing employment and education for its citizens, the SED may have needed and used the *Konsum* as something of a dumping-ground for training women, young girls, and disabled young workers. This was the perspective of Dr. Burchard Bösche (an executive within the Hamburg based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*). While this may have been the case, there

⁸⁶⁸ Barbara Bollwahn, *Frauengenossenschaften-Genossenschaftsfrauen* (MGV, taz, ZdK [Hrsg.]), 25-26.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 8-10.

⁸⁷² Ibid., 13-15.

⁸⁷³ SWA: U2/SWA 1370, Entwurf der Entschließung zum Genossenschaftstag am 26./27. Aug. 49.

is no secondary or primary evidence to elaborate on Bösche's statement. In his opinion, "the HO and the other state-owned-industries received what they perceived as the more apt workers (male with working-class heritage). For this reason, the *Konsum* workforce became predominantly female and young."⁸⁷⁴ Of course, another reason for the *Konsum*'s support of female employment, especially of young women, was to tap into a pool of labour and recruit them as potential candidates for and supporters of the party.⁸⁷⁵

9.2. Working conditions

The *Konsum* employed over 238,000 workers and salaried employees by the late 1950s and into the 1960s.⁸⁷⁶ The situation of the workers was determined by two factors. As mentioned, there was a law ensuring that every citizen had the right to work and to be paid according to his or her contribution to the socialist economy. Furthermore, the state was (at least on paper) directing its resources into improved pay, working conditions, professional support, and health coverage, as well as providing advice on the proper use of free time. The *Konsum* was to act in accordance with these state aims and implement them in all its retail outlets and factories.⁸⁷⁷ While archival documents refer to these workers' rights and the improvement of working conditions, it is unlikely that much investment actually reached the very lowest levels of the organization and improved the conditions of its predominantly female workforce. As section 9.3 will show, *Konsum* workers used their position as middlemen, or more accurately middle-women, to their advantage to compensate for low pay.

⁸⁷⁴ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

⁸⁷⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/2.029/86, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Büro Dr. Erich Apel und Wirtschaftskommission beim Politbüro - Beschluss über die Aufgaben der Parteiorganisationen in den Konsumgenossenschaften bei der Lösung der vom V. Parteitag der SED gestellten Aufgaben, date not given, 21.

⁸⁷⁶ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 34.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

9.2.1. Factory working conditions



Illustration 42: Female workers in the *Konsum* chocolate factory >>Tangetta<< in Tangermünde in the 1950s⁸⁷⁸

The VDK and the *Bezirksverbände* were responsible for a considerable network of co-operative factories, which not only produced goods for consumption in the consumer co-operatives while simultaneously helping to fulfill state plans and economic targets.⁸⁷⁹ These factories focused on producing freshly baked goods and freshly cut meat products, with an overall target of helping the *Konsum* supply the daily food requirement for a third of the East German population.⁸⁸⁰ The July 1948 edition of the co-operative newspaper *Konsum: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt* indicated that the *Konsum* had fifty-eight factories, including four mills, one large bakery, three meat factories, four marmalade factories, three fruit processors, one dough factory, two cereal products factories, one malt coffee factory, one mustard factory, three sweets factories, one mineral water factory, three breweries, three spirits factories, one chewing tobacco factory, three vinegar factories, one stationery factory, four clothing factories, one shoe factory, a brush factory, and two soap factories.⁸⁸¹ By 1957, the *Konsum* had four factories that produced mustard. The co-operative factory (*Konsum-Seifenfabrik*) at Riesa produced washing soap, washing powder, shampoo, and stain-remover.

⁸⁷⁸ Ludwig, "Kaffee, Kekse und Bonbons," 168.

⁸⁷⁹ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 27.

⁸⁸⁰ Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR*, Band 12: 168.

⁸⁸¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt Juli 1948, Juli 1948/Nr.1, 118.

There were various other *Konsum* factories in Cottbus, Güstrow, Erfurt, Riesa, and Magdeburg. This network of factories continued to expand until the demise of the East German state.⁸⁸²

Working life in these factories involved difficult conditions and relatively long working hours. By 1959, workers in factories had to put in a forty-five hour work week, while sales women in the retail outlets had to work forty-eight hours a week. Workers in the factories received a low base salary, but they were eligible for productivity bonuses.⁸⁸³ Moreover, on account of the DDR's shortage economy, there was never enough money or resources to pay for properly ventilated and well-lit factory halls with modern machines that would have lessened the physical demands on workers. More often than not, workplaces were very cold in the winter and extremely hot in the summer. Cleanliness and the monotony of the work were also problematic. The situation was made worse by the continual breakdown of old machines and inconsistent deliveries of much needed raw materials and prefabricated parts. These incessant problems meant production was interrupted and the goals of the centralized plans could not be achieved. Thus, the workforce had to endure overtime to compensate for broken-down machines and an inefficient division of labour in order to meet the objectives of the centralized plan.⁸⁸⁴

9.2.2. Retail working conditions

DDR society tended to devalue retail co-operative work because of the disproportionate number of women in this organization. Consequently, retail work in the *Konsum* was considered simple, housewifely, and feminine.⁸⁸⁵ Thus, the high number of women in retail work actually devalued the profession. Even though more than eighty-five percent of the workers in retail trade were women, only a few of them were in the top leadership positions. Furthermore, most

⁸⁸² Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 94.

⁸⁸³ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 35.

⁸⁸⁴ Madarász, *Working in East Germany*: 26.

⁸⁸⁵ Merkel, "Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR," 88.

Konsum employees were forced to endure longer hours than the average industrial worker.⁸⁸⁶ These conditions contributed to a high turnover rate, which in turn worsened an already stressful working environment.⁸⁸⁷

The average monthly income of the workers in trade and the *Konsum* was nearly a quarter below the average salary of an industrial worker, because the SED deemed retail work to be unqualified labour. The workers in retail received a base-salary, which the party and the SED believed was in accordance with the demands of the work and its contribution to the socialist economy.⁸⁸⁸ It should be noted, however, that workers also received a productivity bonus, which usually constituted twenty percent of their income. Though saleswomen in the retail outlets were paid a bonus in the form of a percentage of the retail turnover, these bonuses were also dependent upon the manner in which one was employed.⁸⁸⁹ The profit bonuses and the general lack of goods offered to workers generated little incentive for extra work.⁸⁹⁰ The specialist saleswomen earned somewhere between 365 to 415 DM, whereas a head administrator of a retail outlet had a salary of as much as 500 to 545 DM per month. Pay increased after five years of employment and also increased with professional training.⁸⁹¹

To provide a better understanding of the purchasing power of the average *Konsum* income, the following is a list of living expenses in the DDR for the year 1959:

1 square meter of living space	0.65 to 0.90 DM
1 kilowatt of household electricity	0.08 DM
1 cubic meter of gas	0.16 DM

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁸ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic, 77.

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vortrag für Vorstandsitzung der Kammer am 27. Oktober 1947: Einzelhandel und Konsumgenossenschaften im Dienste der Verbraucher, 58.

⁸⁹¹ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 35.

2 hundredweights of lignite briquettes.....	3.84 DM
1 km public train transport	0.08 DM
1 suit	approximately 160 to 210 DM
1 pair of shoes	approximately 15 to 55 DM
1 kg of rye bread	0.48 DM
2 hundredweights of potatoes	9.60 DM
1 kg of meat	4.60 to 7.80 DM
1 kg of lard	3.10 DM
1 kg of butter	9.80 DM
1 litre of whole milk	0.68 DM ⁸⁹²

Most of these goods were subsidized by the state and within the means of the average *Konsum* worker. In an anonymous 2011 interview, a former teacher in the DDR described *Grundnahrungsmittel* (basic foodstuffs such as bread, milk, sugar, meat) produced and sold in the *Konsum* as “quite cheap.”⁸⁹³ What is unlikely, however, is that *Konsum* workers could easily have afforded heavily taxed industrial goods, such as televisions, radios, washing machines, and refrigerators – the taxes for which were used to subsidize basic foodstuffs and general living expenses. In the words of the interviewee, “such goods were *super teuer* (super expensive). Nevertheless, there were credit programs to help consumers pay for these goods.”⁸⁹⁴ Another possibility is that this salary was sufficient and even allowed people to purchase high-price items, such as TVs, washing machines, and cars. The issue was not the price, since there was surplus of MdN in circulation on account of increasing salaries for workers; the issue was availability and waiting lines.⁸⁹⁵

Since two thirds of *Konsum* workers and the majority of *Konsum* retail workers were women, there were a number of measures in place to assure the protection of their health. For instance, women were given one free day a month to do household work. This monthly day off

⁸⁹² Ibid.

⁸⁹³ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁸⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁵ Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 268.

was introduced in 1952 and was a paid day off for married and workingwomen, which became known as the household day or *Haushaltstag*. Before and after the birth of a child they could claim extensive social and economic benefits, including access to a nursery and kindergarten system.⁸⁹⁶ As of 1975, women were eligible to receive children's allowances of twenty MdN per month per child, in addition to childbirth allowances of 1,000 MdN.⁸⁹⁷ In cases of illness, workers received six weeks' pay at ninety percent of regular salary; thereafter, they received fifty percent. Workers were covered for medical treatments, medications, hospital stays, and sojourns in health resorts. The yearly vacation ranged from eighteen to twenty-one days. Workers were required to pay a thirty MdN union fee as a contribution to their vacations and holidays. Children of *Konsum* employees also received a free three-week stay at various vacation spots. Workers and members could participate in the various sports societies and cultural groups sponsored by the *Konsum*.⁸⁹⁸ The actual investment the *Konsum* put into these benefits is difficult to ascertain. At a minimum, *Konsum* workers could use progressive rhetoric to wrestle some benefits from the state. Officially, the objectives of these benefits were to enhance the general living experience of the *Konsum* employee during work and play.⁸⁹⁹ Unofficially, the benefits were designed to garner loyalty to the *Konsum* organization and the socialist system, and were yet another attempted totalitarian incursion into the private lives of citizens, since they enabled the state to control the leisure and vacation time of *Konsum* employees.

⁸⁹⁶ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 35.

⁸⁹⁷ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic, 77.

⁸⁹⁸ SWA: U64/336, (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 36.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

Retail work in the *Konsum* was often stressful, unappreciated, and with limited career opportunities.⁹⁰⁰ Historian Donna Harsch raises the point that “in most towns, saleswomen worked in tiny, gloomy *Konsum* shops that offered neither a hot meal nor warm camaraderie. The local SED or trade union showed little interest in them. The turnover rate of retail personnel was very high, as was the rate of retreating into part-time work.”⁹⁰¹ The workers often had inconvenient working hours, which often included weekend shifts. In the smaller shops, there was a two-hour midday break, which lengthened the working day. Because lifting vehicles were not readily available, saleswomen had to move crates and boxes by hand, and some employees had to move up to twenty-five tons on a weekly basis.⁹⁰² As a result, saleswomen continually demanded smaller packaging, but industry and wholesale continued to produce only unwieldy and heavy packaging.⁹⁰³ According to historian Ina Merkel, “in the summer months, female *Konsum* employees had to move up to 200 boxes of drinks, with the average weight being approximately twenty-eight kg each, and were moving up to five tones on a daily basis or twenty-five tones weekly without any technological help.”⁹⁰⁴ In 1964, thirty percent of the workers in the *Konsum* left their jobs because of the difficult working conditions and low pay in the retail outlets.⁹⁰⁵

The *Konsum* attempted to lighten the workload of its female employees. For instance, in 1965, there were ten express checkouts installed at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Nordost-Leipzig*. Apparently, both customers and cashiers felt that this simplified their consumption and work.

⁹⁰⁰ Men also worked for the *Konsum* as salesmen. The division of labour in these outlets was gendered, with men generally working in the larger *Konsum* stores and in the technology departments, as well as in the *Konsum* butcher shops. Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁹⁰¹ Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*: 255-56.

⁹⁰² Merkel, "Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR," 88.

⁹⁰³ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 92.

⁹⁰⁴ Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 190-91.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Furthermore, coffee and cigarettes were made available in a self-service format, and *Konsum* employees reported that this method of payment eliminated extra work.⁹⁰⁶ The *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Pankow* also tried to lighten the workload of women (eighty-six percent of this co-operative's workforce). Of course, as will become apparent in later sections of this chapter, this "lightening of the workload" was intended to enable women to use their newly won leisure-time to participate in political meetings and become functionaries within the co-operatives.⁹⁰⁷

In spite of these efforts, employees continued to write petitions to the SED and *Konsum* authorities about their deplorable working conditions. In one such example written to the Minister of Trade and Provision from 13 December 1987, Frau Leue complains that the saleswomen at the *Konsum* Hühndorf were forced to deal with a malfunctioning heating system causing them to work in temperatures of around six degrees Celsius.⁹⁰⁸

The anger and aggressiveness of the customers was also a constant problem about which saleswomen complained to their superiors.⁹⁰⁹ Numerous *Eingaben* demonstrate that *Konsum* workers had to deal with frustrated customers. For instance, in a letter written to a retail outlet on Leipzig's Hainstraße, the writer wrote, "it is no longer about money. I am ashamed of our consumer culture. West Germans have it so much easier!"⁹¹⁰ In another letter, the *Konsum* customer wrote that "in the interest of socialist trade and the contentment of your clientele, please explain and extend my grievances to your colleague, Frau R., and pass on this letter to

⁹⁰⁶ SWA: U2/(SWA 2532) I/336, Ergebnisse bei der Schaffung weiterer Einkaufserleichterungen für die werktätigen Frauen, KG Nordost, Leipzig, den 3.7.65.

⁹⁰⁷ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 5, Rechenschaftsbericht der Betriebsparteiorganisation der Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Pankow für die Wahlberichtsversammlung am 22.3.1965.

⁹⁰⁸ AKB: Eingaben 1988, Nr. 1/88 bis 50/88, 1035/19.

⁹⁰⁹ Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*: 190-91.

⁹¹⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1401, An Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt Leipzig / Betrifft: Ihre Verkaufsstelle Schuhhaus Hainstr. 16-18.

her.”⁹¹¹ Herr G. demanded that Frau W. (saleswomen at retail outlet 277 in Leipzig) be reprimanded for her inhumane and bureaucratic conduct.⁹¹² Finally, in another *Eingabe*, a man and his wife complained about the disagreeable tone of a saleswoman at a *Konsum* retail outlet in Leipzig and the negative impression she was having on the young employees. Accordingly, these two customers began to use the store on Blümnerstraße, where they could apparently rely on better and more polite service.⁹¹³

Similarly, *Konsum* employees used *Eingaben* as a means to complain about customers and to defend themselves. For instance, saleswomen in Zwickau wrote about their treatment at the hands of customers:

Such *Eingaben* displeased us saleswomen. We always tried hard to be polite and accommodating in the service of our clientele even though we were often not treated with the same respect. Unfortunately, we are not in the position to fulfill every wish of our (so-called) customers because in the previous weeks the delivery of meat had been intermittent. In spite of this, we always made every effort to make our meat products available to customers as fast and as fresh as possible. In fact, our selection and quality of meat was becoming comparable to that of West Germany. I only wish that customers who wrote such *Eingaben* had to experience working behind the sales counter and were personally confronted by the many problems we saleswomen had to deal with on a daily basis.⁹¹⁴

Section 9.3 explores the often-tense relations between customers and employees in more detail.

The evidence presented in this sub-section reveals how the party recognized the miserable working conditions in the *Konsum* and issued statements claiming it would make improvements. However, even if there were pay increases, money had little purchasing power in the DDR. Accordingly, employees of the *Konsum* had to find other ways to compensate for their disadvantaged position. The following section will demonstrate that these attempts to improve

⁹¹¹ SWA: U2/SWA 1401, Beschwerde über das Verhalten der Verkaufsstellenleiterin der Verkaufsstelle Nr. 278 – Georg-Schwarz-Str. 136 (am Leutzscher Rathaus), (Date not given).

⁹¹² SWA: U2/SWA 2801, betr.: Beschwerde, An die Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig, den 31.8.1962.

⁹¹³ SWA: U2/SWA 2801, Betr: Stadtbezirk Südwest, Spätverkaufsstelle, An die Konsum-Genossenschaft Stadt Leipzig, 17 April 1962.

⁹¹⁴ SWA: U64/242, Betrifft die Eingabe vom 03.06.90 von Frau P.

working conditions were probably never fully realized, since employees had to use their direct access to consumer goods to compensate for their low pay and dreary working conditions. Historian Jonathan Zatlin points out, “In the DDR, working conditions in retail stores had deteriorated by the mid-1980s to the point where theft was perceived by workers as appropriate compensation for being overworked and underpaid.”⁹¹⁵

9.3. Theft and Vitamin B

In East Germany personal connections (*Beziehungen*, or what was sarcastically referred to as Vitamin B) and theft curtailed some of the harsh realities of living under the command economy for at least some of the people.⁹¹⁶ Given the scarcity of consumer goods, these connections became extremely important for consumers and led to widespread incidents of corruption at *Konsum* distribution points. In fact, like others working in East German retail, *Konsum* employees stole goods from the workplace for use at home or for sale on the black market. This type of corruption was endemic in Soviet-style command economies.⁹¹⁷ However, in spite of difficult working conditions, the perpetual scarcity of consumer goods strengthened the economic and political power of the *Konsum* and its mostly female workforce. In fact, *Konsum* employees who were entrusted with distributing goods were in a privileged position; that is, they could ensure that friends and family had direct access to a better selection of needed products. To quote Zatlin:

The scarcity of key consumer goods increased the power of the institutions and individuals entrusted with the distribution of those goods. Proximity to the party leadership or to the local distribution nexus – such as ties of family or friendship to the salesperson behind the meat counter at the neighbourhood grocery store – often guaranteed better and more reliable choices. In this manner, the shortages forced the East German Mark into the role of a partially, rather than universally, exchangeable

⁹¹⁵ Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 153.

⁹¹⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* 65-66.

⁹¹⁷ Bösche, "Interview with Wolfgang Richter," 27.

goods, thereby robbing it of its quality of money. Privilege and corruption began to replace the *Ostmark* as the coin of the realm.⁹¹⁸

Konsum workers were held responsible and often criminally charged for what can either be interpreted as honest mistakes in inventory and monetary shortfalls or blatant thievery. In either case, the employees were held liable for inventory and monetary shortcomings.⁹¹⁹ In 1948, the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Lübben* was short by 180,000 Reichsmark on its balance sheet. Accordingly, the party demanded that the auditing commission of this co-operative be checked. Shortly thereafter, arrests were made and its *Vorstand* was reshuffled.⁹²⁰ At the co-operative store in Altlandsberg, Frau Kurth was responsible for the disappearance of forty-seven kg of fat, seventy-five kg of oatmeal, seventeen kg of noodles, and twenty-two packages of sweets. Consequently, the criminal court in Cottbus sentenced her to time in jail.⁹²¹ A report from December 1953 from the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Köpenick-Berlin* interpreted the corruption within this co-operative as the result of inadequate ideological training and political disloyalty. This report highlights the particularly meagre ideological consciousness of Frau G., who according to a complaint by a fellow worker, was putting goods aside for specific customers so that they could later be bought “under the table” (*unter dem Ladentisch*).⁹²²

The *Konsum* tried to combat theft and selling under the table by reviewing the responsibilities given to specific workers and raising their level of socialist consciousness by sending them to the *Konsum* schools for political and ideological training.⁹²³ In spite of these

⁹¹⁸ Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism*: 12.

⁹¹⁹ Merkel, "Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR," 88.

⁹²⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Abteilung: Genossenschaftswesen, Bericht von Karl Draeger, 15.Juni.1948, 19-20.

⁹²¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Zentralkomitee: Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Vortrag für Vorstandsitzung der Kammer am 27. Oktober 1947: Einzelhandel und Konsumgenossenschaften im Dienste der Verbraucher, 58.

⁹²² LAB: C Rep. 904-138 Nr. 1, EntschlieÙung der BPO der Konsumgenossenschaft Köpenick, Berlin, den 14.12.1953, 2.

⁹²³ Ibid.

efforts, rampant corruption persisted. A year later at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Pankow*, for instance, there was drastic shortfalls of money.⁹²⁴ Some *Konsum* employees were investigated as a result, and the subsequent investigation determined that a Frau L. (a manager or *Leiterin*) was manipulating the sales receipts. An industrial tribunal transferred this case to the public prosecutor's office (*Staatsanwaltschaft*). Frau K. (*Leiterin* of the retail outlet 109) was held responsible for a 1,970 MdN shortfall and charged with selling goods without distributing receipts. There were also criminal cases against two saleswomen – Frau M. and Frau M., at retail outlet 839. They were responsible for a combined inventory shortfall of 13,500 MdN and charged with giving away highly valued items, such as radios. In another case, they sold a piece of electronic equipment for 1.31 MdN instead of 131 MdN. Frau S. (*Leiterin* of retail outlet 145) received a jail sentence for the shortfall or theft of forty MdN per day. These examples illustrate one certainty and one possibility. Sales personnel were held responsible for shortfalls in inventory and could face possible criminal sentences even if they were a result of honest mistakes. But given the repetitive nature and the amounts stolen, the other, more likely, outcome is that these aforementioned cases were examples of actual corruption and that retail workers were taking advantage of their position.⁹²⁵ To interpret this “corruption” as resistance or opposition is perhaps aggrandizement. However, it can perhaps be accurately described as selective participation, since these women were depriving the state and the *Konsum* for their personal advantage while ignoring the ideological norms imposed on them.

Being a successful East German consumer required that one learn to understand how to navigate the system either by waiting in long lines, writing letters of complaint to the authorities (*Eingaben*), fabricating scarce items, or cultivating connections to people with access to

⁹²⁴ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 3, An die Leitung der BPO Konsum-Genossenschaft Berlin-Pankow, Berlin, den 27.3.1955, 2.

⁹²⁵ Ibid., 5-7.

resources through gifts or bribery.⁹²⁶ *Konsum* employees, therefore, had real power over their customers by controlling their access to needed and desired goods, making it necessary for the consumer to maintain cordial relations with *Konsum* employees. In two interviews conducted in 2011, both Herr Fitzkow and an anonymous interviewee stressed the worth of having close relations with sales staff in the *Konsum* in order to improve one's chances of acquiring desired goods.⁹²⁷ The anonymous interviewee described relations between customers and clients as generally normal in larger shopping outlets. However, in smaller centres, in which there were often shortages of specific and highly sought after products, there was a great deal of selling under the table to friends, relatives, and regular customers. She described these relations as "systemic" and as "one hand washing the other" or "Vitamin B."⁹²⁸ As she admits, "I also profited from Vitamin B. My stepmother was a saleswoman in a *Konsum* produce store, so I was always able to get bananas for my children."⁹²⁹

The following *Eingaben* clearly illustrate the importance of relations with *Konsum* sales staff. To quote an anonymous letter writer,

I lived in Marienbrunnen and shopped as a member of the *Konsum* at your retail outlet 128. I cannot understand why there is never any butter there. On Saturday 26 October at midday, I was there and wanted to buy some butter, but all I received was a curt reply: "There is no butter!" Since I couldn't go back again on the same day, I again went back on Monday the 28 October. That day, I got the same reply: "There is no butter, not until Thursday!" Although I was upset that I had to go back a third time, I was actually angrier about the tone used by the salesperson. Unfortunately, I cannot write my name because I again want to shop at sales outlet 128 and I don't want to be treated in such a curtly and unfriendly way.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁶ Crew, "Consuming Germany and the Cold War," 1.

⁹²⁷ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

⁹²⁸ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

⁹²⁹ Ibid.

⁹³⁰ SWA: U2/SWA 1401, Eingabe an die Konsumgenossenschaft Hauptstelle Leipzig, Industriestr. (date not given).

The intriguing part of this *Eingabe* was that the customer deliberately chose to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation and of losing the good favour of the sales personnel.

Consumers recognized and lamented the privileged position of *Konsum* employees. In an *Eingabe* addressed to the head of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Eisenach*, the writer of the letter requested that such privileges come to an end:

I would like to turn to you for help with the following request. Could you please look into the saleswomen's working methods, which were, in my opinion, not fair? In the previous week, on 31 October at this co-operative outlet, there were bananas for sale. Because I was at home, I was unaware of this. When my friend came from work, she told me that there were bananas, so we went to pick some up. When we got there, we asked the saleswomen if we could get some bananas. She answered "there's no more left." That was at 2 pm. We could, however, not ascertain how the three shoppers that followed us were able to get three full bags of bananas. In short, the saleswomen at this co-operative outlet were very brazen. What is more, a girl was still able to get bananas at 4 pm. The fact was that the *Konsum* employees were very biased in the ways in which they supplied the customers with goods. For these reasons, I ask you to look into these problems, and I expect improvements.⁹³¹

An *Eingabe* written by Frau F. in 1965 complained about the customers' dependence on *Konsum* personnel for their access to goods. In her words, "while shopping, one was almost always dependent on the favour and mood of the sales personnel. In the interest of those who were not in the circle of acquaintances of the sales personnel, I request to have a discussion with the administrator responsible."⁹³² In a further example of corruption from January 1989, a customer complained about the unfair distribution of beer at retail outlet 715. At this outlet, five crates of beer were delivered in the morning and another five in the evening. To ensure the fair distribution of Wernesgrüner Pilsner, there was a sign: "please take only five bottles." However, this letter writer apparently observed that entire crates of beer were being sold. The writer then

⁹³¹ Unknown, "Aus den Eingaben unsere Bürger: An den Verband der Konsum Genossenschaften der DDR Leiter des Büros des Vorstandes; Betr.: Beschwerde über den Konsum im Ort Lauterbach /ü Eisenach (Date not given)," in *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten*, ed. Manfred Kirsch (Berlin: Eulenspiegel Verlag, 2004), 74.

⁹³² SWA: U2/SWA 2531, Eingaben der Bürger, Konsum-Genossenschaftsverband, Leipzig, den 29.1.65.

raised a question: “why was there such profiteering?”⁹³³ Frau P. wrote a particularly direct *Eingabe* to the consumer co-operative in Zwickau in June 1990:

I was not in agreement with *Konsum* retail methods. The practice of selling goods under the table for specific members needed to be abolished. I was sympathetic to the fact that it was not possible to have every product available for sale all the time, but I cannot tolerate it when the sales women deceive me. For example, on Thursday afternoon I wanted to buy some sausages and meat for three people, but the meat saleswomen told me that there would not be a delivery until the following day, and I relied on this information. However, the next day there was the same meagre assortment. Still, another customer was able to buy fresh sausages. She was the sister-in-law of one of the saleswomen. It is no wonder that more and more people were starting to do their shopping in other stores. Under these conditions, the *Konsum* retail outlets have no future.⁹³⁴

The directness of the language in Frau P.’s letter is likely a signal of a shift in the discourse, as well as a reflection that she recognized that the DDR’s days were numbered. Philosopher Michel Foucault posits that “the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its danger.”⁹³⁵ In this case and by the late 1980s, there seems to have been a degradation of the procedures governing discourse. With some certainty, it can, therefore, be concluded that she had been harbouring this negative sentiment towards the *Konsum* and its employees for a long time and only felt confident to openly express her dismay during the final days of the East German state. I would argue that this change in discourse demonstrates how broad shifts in late twentieth-century geo-politics played themselves out on a micro-level in East Germany.

Stasi and police forces were used to combat corruption in the *Konsum*. In fact, in the late 1980s, the Stasi was monitoring relations between *Konsum* employees and customers at a

⁹³³ SWA: U64/242, *Eingabe*, *Betreff*: Verkaufsstelle Vettermannstraße VKE-Nr. 0715, 31. Jan 1989.

⁹³⁴ SWA: U64/242, *Eingabe* an die Konsumgenossenschaft Stadt und Kreis Dorotheenstr. 24-26 Zwickau, 3.6.90.

⁹³⁵ Foucault, "Discourse on Language," 149.

Konsum outlet in Karl-Marx-Stadt (present-day Chemnitz). This retail outlet was located on Sonnenstraße and was apparently as well stocked as other retail outlets, yet there were constant customer complaints about access to goods and customer treatment at the hands of the sales staff. The Stasi reported that sales personnel were not working in accordance with socialist principles; rather they were apparently involved in secretive, “*unter der Hand*” dealings with customers.⁹³⁶ Consequently, the goods available to customers without contacts or close relations with sales personnel were severely limited, and they were forced to spend a lot of time in search of desired goods in other stores. The Stasi was notified and the leading employees of this retail outlet were brought under further investigation.⁹³⁷ In 1981, the Stasi further reported further acts of theft being committed by a group of employees at the *Konsum* bakery in Grimmen. Apparently, these workers were stealing various products amounting to 10,000 MdN per month. The Stasi determined that part of the cause of this thievery and corruption was the high level of alcohol consumed during working hours. It also profiled some of the workers at the Grimmen *Konsum* bakery, including their political affiliations. Worker A was a member of the DBD and apparently overburdened. Worker B had no party affiliation, but was deemed as loyal. The administrator, a member of the SED, failed to carry out his or her duties and was unable to comprehend the severity of the problems in this bakery.⁹³⁸ Remember, perhaps the most powerful and coercive tool in the Stasi’s arsenal was not necessarily its hard power (prisons and munitions); rather, it was the ability to define identity, which gave the Stasi significant leverage over the citizenry. Hence, Worker B was lucky to be deemed as “loyal” and not “disloyal.” Yet,

⁹³⁶ BStU - Karl-Marx-Stadt AKG Nr. 9341, Information über Hinweise aus der Bevölkerung zu Mängeln in der Arbeit der Konsum-Möbelverkaufsstelle Karl-Marx-Stadt, Sonnenstraße (Date not given – likely the late 1980s), 405-06.

⁹³⁷ Ibid.

⁹³⁸ BStU - MfS BV Rostock AKG Nr. 558, Kreisdienststelle den Konsumbackwarenbetrieb Grimmen, 3.4.1981, 14-17.

in spite of this threat, consumer-tacticians continued to use Vitamin B as a means for everyday life.

Relationships and favours held real significance in the DDR. Since *Konsum* employees controlled access to goods, this placed them in a relatively privileged position in a shortage-economy, a position that they often used as compensation for being underpaid and for enduring difficult working conditions. And because commodities were often bought, sold, and traded on the level of *Eine Hand wäscht die andere* (one hand washing the other), those without anything to barter experienced real hardships within the DDR's favour-economy. Therefore, the only avenue available to those without "connections" was to write *Eingaben* and complain directly to state authorities at the risk of becoming a *Petze* (tattle tale) and gaining the disfavour of the *Konsum* salespeople. Nevertheless, after enough letters were written, *Eingaben* generally worked, as salespeople would then be ordered to quell the complaints. However, this tactic was usually at the expense of the consumer losing the favour of the salespeople in the shop, resulting in a potential decline in customer service. Not surprisingly, during an interview a former *Konsum* saleswoman defended the customer service in the *Konsum*, but admitted that there were, of course, unfriendly saleswomen. She also noted "relations with *Konsum* staff were extremely important in order to get "in-demand articles."⁹³⁹ Yet, Herr Fitzkow also describes his relations with *Konsum* staff as positive: "the sales-women made great efforts to serve their customers, even though the goods were simply often not there to deliver. Yet, with such shortages, there was corruption."⁹⁴⁰

⁹³⁹ Author's interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.

⁹⁴⁰ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

9.4. Politicization of the workforce and workplace

There was pressure placed on *Konsum* workers to engage in political activities and ideological work. This participation in political and party life was evaluated and measured through attendance in political meetings and events.

At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Köpenick*, it was estimated that out of fifty-one party members, only thirteen were actively involved in party life and political meetings in 1957.⁹⁴¹ During these meetings, the *Konsum* made efforts to explain to its workers that fleeing to West Germany was treasonous and advantageous to NATO. The *Konsum* warned its workers that West German capitalism was exploitive and tried to explain to them that the “authoritarian system of West Germany did not have a future; therefore, there was no reason for a person to flee the DDR.”⁹⁴² In spite of these efforts to convince workers that the DDR was the better Germany, the *Konsum* was impacted by so many of its workers fleeing to the West.⁹⁴³ *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Mitte* reported that six colleagues, four of whom were women, fled the DDR in 1957. In 1958, this number increased to sixteen, 11 of whom were women. Accordingly, the *Konsum* authorities became alarmed and believed that these women had failed to recognize that the DDR was a country of peace and that only the socialist political and economic system could ensure prosperity and a life of happiness. As a consequence, the remaining female *Konsum* workers had to attend lectures and discussions in women’s committees to make them aware of the problems facing West Germany.⁹⁴⁴

⁹⁴¹ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 3, Einschätzung der Parteileitung über die Arbeit der Genossen, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Köpenick, d. 8.7.1957.

⁹⁴² BStU - MfS Zentralarchiv 2493/67, Bericht zur Vorstands – Sitzung am 8. Oktober 1958 über die Republikfluchten bis zum 30.9.58 in unserer KG-Mitte, 24-25.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid.

Workers and functionaries contributed to the politicization of their own workplace. In fact, party members and candidates working in the *Konsum* were required to conduct conversations with their colleagues about the development and consolidation of the workers' and peasants' state, as well as to clarify political questions.⁹⁴⁵ Additionally, SED agitators were embedded into the workforce for the purpose of educating their colleagues while refuting any false opinions they might pose. Another priority of this agitation work was to convince *Konsum* workers to join the party. At the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Pankow*, for instance, agitators gave themselves the goal of gaining six candidates for party membership by the end of the year (1964). In order to achieve this goal, the agitators held conversations with their colleagues who were not affiliated with any party.⁹⁴⁶

9.4.1. Stasi observation of the *Konsum* workforce

The Stasi infiltrated the *Konsum* and kept records on the mundane activities of its employees. The presence of the Stasi and its officers in workplaces was not routine, since there were simply not enough officers. However, as this sub-section argues, the presence of informers who were unknown to workers were part of the routine and much more dangerous.

In 1954 in Wittenberg, an employee at the local *Konsum* store in the electronics department was evaluated as a positive promoter of socialist consumer culture amongst his co-workers and customers and was described as quiet, polite, and courteous. Through his work in promoting *Konsum* fashion shows, he had “demonstrated a positive interest in his consumer co-operative.” His file contains biographical information such as his being a member of the Nazi Party from 1938 to 1945 and being in an English POW camp from May to August 1945. Since

⁹⁴⁵ LAB: C Rep. 904-035 Nr. 3, Perspektivplan der Betriebsparteiorganisation der KG Köpenick für das Jahr 1957, Berlin, 7.12.1956.

⁹⁴⁶ LAB: C Rep. 904-119 Nr. 5, Arbeitsentschließung der Betriebsparteiorganisation, Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Pankow, 14.4.64.

his behaviour was apparently calm and disciplined, his biographical background did not, as the document states, “pose any disadvantage for him.”⁹⁴⁷ In another report from the Wittenberge cooperative in 1954, an employee was given a positive evaluation for leading a musical group. This man apparently had “an open character and good relations with customers, and it was unknown if he had connections to the West and West Berlin.”⁹⁴⁸ To use Stephen Kotkin’s turn of phrase, it was “the ability to define who people were,”⁹⁴⁹ which made the Stasi a truly totalitarian and coercive instrument of state control.

Notably, these reports and biographies were often tainted with personal views and preferences, which led to a highly subjective dissemination of information about the workforce, the state of consumption, and the general mood of the population. For instance, a Stasi-informant code-named “Barbara,” who was born in 1944 in Bad Elster, became an apprentice at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Adorf* from 1960 to 1963. She trained to be an economist at the *Konsum* College for Domestic Trade from 1964 to 1967. Then Barbara was recruited to spy for the Stasi on 6 January 1977.⁹⁵⁰ In 1982, Barbara was imbedded in the *Konsum* to report on the mood, loyalty, and opinions voiced by the administration and her co-workers. She concluded that the current conflict in Lebanon was having a negative impact on the mood of the *Konsum* workforce, since her co-workers believed it could lead to a wider confrontation between the super powers and a worsening of the entire global situation during the early 1980s.⁹⁵¹ The legitimacy of Barbara’s report is difficult to decipher. To speculate, perhaps Barbara’s colleagues were genuinely concerned about the crisis in Lebanon; however, she may have simply been feeding her superiors what they wanted to hear. Whatever the case, biases expressed within

⁹⁴⁷ BStU - BV Schwerin, AIM 817/55 P, Beurteilung, Wittenberge Datum: 13.10.54.

⁹⁴⁸ BStU - BV Schwerin, AIM 817/55 P, Beurteilung, Wittenberge, den 9.11.1954, 19.

⁹⁴⁹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*: 224.

⁹⁵⁰ BStU - BV-Karl-Marx-Stadt Oelsnitz XIV 1416/76 I/I, Auskunftsbereich Datum: 20.4.1978, 84-85.

⁹⁵¹ BStU - BV-Karl-Marx-Stadt Oelsnitz XIV 1416/76 I/II, Stimmungen und Meinungen, 28.7.82, 433.

the reports of Stasi informants had the potential to endanger workers and colleagues, and render the Stasi a less effective communications instrument between populace and state. The masses of reports flooded the secret police service with endless amounts of useless information. For example, a Stasi informant code-named Stähr reported to a Major Mühlberg about an employee at the *Konsum* restaurant in Oranienburg. On 20 August 1979, Stähr reported to Mühlberg that he was successful in infiltrating this organization and establishing contact with an employee over the course of several visits to the restaurant. Stähr's report concluded, "This employee served various customers from the surrounding areas such as LPG farmers, tradesmen, and youth, although without close relations with them. The employee was a passionate windsurfer and did not receive further holidays for the month of August. He or she was very angry about this!"⁹⁵² The story of the windsurfing *Konsum* employee illustrates the wastefulness, ineffectiveness, and general uselessness of the vast majority of such reports.

In 1982, the Stasi determined that it was necessary to recruit more domestic spies (voluntary informers or Stasi informants, *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*, **IMs**) to further infiltrate the *Konsum*.⁹⁵³ That year, the Stasi recruited a man codenamed "Theo Bergner," who reported on his colleagues at the consumer co-operative outlet in Stahnsdorf (a small community just east of Potsdam). His report dealt with a woman who was born in Stahnsdorf in 1943 and conducted technical work at the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Stahnsdorf*. Bergner characterized her as modest, honest, and politically loyal; however, she had strong religious beliefs. During a visit to her house, Bergner reported that she was in possession of religious relics. She also had possible western contacts, but this was not certain. She was in a long-term relationship with a man who

⁹⁵² BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS - HA II Nr. 32768, Information zu (Name wurde verdunkelt) der Konsumgaststätte Zehlendorf Kr. Oranienburg, Berlin, 19.09.1979, 120.

⁹⁵³ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Vorschlag zur Werbung der IMK/KW „Konsum“, Reg.-Nr.: IV/1173/83, Potsdam, 20.12.1982, 447.

Bergner described as a member of the working-class (*Arbeitertyp*). Her daughter and her three illegitimate children also lived with them.⁹⁵⁴

This preceding denunciation is a clear example of the sinister side of selective participation, which was first discussed in the introduction. Because of this IM, the regime was able to infiltrate social spaces, and breach what Günter Gaus might have described as niches, or the private spheres of family, personal, and sexual life.⁹⁵⁵ Moreover, the fact that this report highlights that the daughter had “illegitimate” children signifies the arbitrary, dangerous, and intrusive nature of such surveillance, and the lack of a private sphere. In this sense, totalitarianism means not the complete control over private lives of individuals, but the state’s attempted claim on the private lives of individuals. Yet, it also shows that active participation was necessary for Stasi control. Ultimately, the drafting of such calculated reports would have almost certainly left its mark on the daily lives of colleagues, neighbours, and classmates and may have forced them to modify their behaviour in certain situations.⁹⁵⁶

Bergner then reported on a second saleswoman, a twenty-year old living in Potsdam. She was trained and studied at the State Co-operative in Potsdam (*Genossenschaft KG Potsdam-Land*). According to Bergner’s assessment, she was a so-called late developer, (*Spätentwickler*), and he characterized her as friendly and honest. The assessment states:

There were clear inconsistencies not to be overlooked, because she did not inform on a former colleague’s alcohol problems. In September 1982, she will receive her qualification certificate to begin work as an administrator of a co-operative retail outlet. She is married and her husband is considered to be a member of the working-class, who has made a positive impression at a party gathering. For her services, she had been

⁹⁵⁴ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Mündlicher Bericht des IMK/KW „Theo Bergner“ vom 14.07.1982 zum Personal der Konsumverkaufstelle in Stahnsdorf, 146.

⁹⁵⁵ Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt*; Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945*: 159.

⁹⁵⁶ Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur: Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971-1989*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1998), 153.

honoured with a trip abroad. She is not affiliated with any party and it is believed that she had not conducted any negative political discussions.⁹⁵⁷

Bergner determined that there was a positive partnership between the two saleswomen. He concluded his report by noting that the women were neither garrulous nor did they engage in interests directly related to their workplace.⁹⁵⁸ The saleswomen likely suspected Bergner of having Stasi affiliations and purposefully remained silent in his company.

The cases explored in this section demonstrate the lengths that the Stasi went to in the gathering of information about mundane aspects in the lives of East German citizens. As this sub-section has shown, Bruce is correct when he suggests, “What is remarkable about the Stasi is its penetration of the most ordinary, ostensibly nonthreatening, areas of East Germany... It is difficult to imagine that a dictatorship with the range of instruments that the DDR had could not colour, in very real terms, the ordinary lives of East Germans.”⁹⁵⁹ He continues to speculate as to why some East Germans worked and became informants for the Stasi. In his words, “some informants worked for the Stasi out of conviction, some for personal or material gain, some used the Stasi for personal vendettas, and many were coerced (a more appropriate descriptor than ‘persuaded’).”⁹⁶⁰

There are number of conclusions that need to be drawn from this sub-section. First of all, the Stasi was willing to spend time and resources to report on *Konsum* employees. These reports allude to the state’s attempts to infiltrate into the most humdrum and anodyne aspects of everyday life of its citizens and support my general arguments about totalitarianism and the high-level of state infiltration into the private sphere. Furthermore, this sub-section has shown that

⁹⁵⁷ BStU - Archiv der Außenstelle Potsdam: BVfS Potsdam Abt. XVIII 189, Mündlicher Bericht des IMK/KW „Theo Bergner“ vom 14.07.1982 zum Personal der Konsumverkaufsstelle in Stahnsdorf, 146-47.

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁹ Bruce, *The Firm*: 11-12.

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid., 14.

socio-political biographies of individuals became the preferred means of investigation and the primary starting point for either promotion or disciplinary action. Therefore, the most powerful weapon at the Stasi's disposal was its ability to literally define people in language and in terms of social categories established by the state.⁹⁶¹ It is for this reason that one can define the DDR as a sort of "bio-state" in which political biographies carried enormous importance in social and power relations, especially when seeking career or political advancement. Hence, it is extremely likely that there were real-life positive and negative consequences for the people mentioned in these aforementioned reports. Finally, Stasi infiltration was arbitrary and dangerous for the employees of the *Konsum* and such infiltration demonstrates that the consumer co-operatives were neither independent nor autonomous spaces. To apply this conclusion more broadly, free, neutral, and autonomous spaces, as this evidence demonstrates, likely did not readily exist anywhere in the DDR.

9.4.2. Brigades

Instruction brigades were commonly used in the SED system. Originating in the centres of state and power, they consisted of (usually small) groups of instructors and workers of various statuses who were sent to the lowest levels of the democratic centralist hierarchy in order to conduct "fact-finding-missions."⁹⁶² When necessary, these brigades would offer suggestions for improvement or implement new regulations. The primary purpose of these brigades was to motivate workers to increase productivity by promoting collective team efforts, personal initiatives and self-discipline, as well as competitions with other brigades. In some ways, they were even seen as a mechanism for inculcating "socialist morality" by promoting the norms of

⁹⁶¹ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*: 224-25.

⁹⁶² Thomas Lindenberger, "Creating State Socialist Governance: The Case of the Deutsche Volkspolizei," in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad Hugo Jarausch (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 131.

the SED state to other brigade members and workers.⁹⁶³ Within the *Konsum*, the brigades functioned as small party organizations with the purpose of eliminating ideological uncertainties about the role of the socialist state and for producing cordial relations between the consumer co-operative and the state organs.⁹⁶⁴

From 1947 to 1948, brigades were formed and introduced in the SBZ, and their numbers rapidly expanded. By the end of 1950, there were more than 98,000 brigades, with 663,000 workers. In the course of the 1950s, the brigade movement began to flourish to such an extent that they became a fixed part of the workplaces of economic enterprises from the 1960s right through to 1989. Their numbers expanded greatly in the Honecker period (1971 to 1989). By 1988, 5,500,000 people (nearly two thirds of all workers) were members of a brigade.⁹⁶⁵ The size of brigades ranged from small cells of a few workers to thirty members or more. Within the brigades, the problems with working conditions were discussed and reported upwards to the higher branches of the factory. The brigades were used as a tool to solve various problems with working and living conditions. For some, the brigades offered the inter-personal relations of a social group.⁹⁶⁶

The brigades were charged with developing the political and ideological life of non-party members within the *Konsum*, ensuring that workers participated in ideological and technical training and the building of socialism. In this sense, the members of the brigades were to act as models of orderly, socialist behaviour.⁹⁶⁷ For example, a VDK brigade was placed in the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Berlin-Mitte* in 1959. It sought to increase the productivity of this co-

⁹⁶³ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 225.

⁹⁶⁴ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/2.029/86, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Büro Dr. Erich Apel und Wirtschaftskommission beim Politbüro - Beschluss über die Aufgaben der Parteiorganisationen in den Konsumgenossenschaften bei der Lösung der vom V. Parteitag der SED gestellten Aufgaben, date not given, 18.

⁹⁶⁵ Fulbrook, *The People's State*: 225.

⁹⁶⁶ Madarász, *Working in East Germany*: 156.

⁹⁶⁷ LAB: C Rep. 904-138 Nr. 1, Entschließung der BPO der Konsumgenossenschaft Köpenick, Berlin, den 14.12.1953.

operative, strengthen its political capacity, enhance its youth work, and improve the working qualifications of its members.⁹⁶⁸ As of November 1959, nearly ten percent of all *Konsum* workers were honorary members of the socialist work brigades.⁹⁶⁹ Additionally, during the late 1950s, the socialist brigades strove for an improved work ethic and general workers' morale within the *Konsum*. These brigades had to ensure that co-operative property was protected and properly cared for while the wishes of customers were met by providing a wide variety of consumer goods. All the while the intent was to improve professional qualifications. The saleswomen and the brigades were to exchange working experiences with each other, as well as to help and support each other through mutual assistance. The overall objective of the brigades was to increase the productivity of the entire *Konsum* retail network in order to better supply the population, and, more generally, to improve the overall strength of the consumer co-operatives.⁹⁷⁰

In the early 1960s, there were sixty workers' brigades in the *Konsum*, which were given the title of "socialist brigade." According to a Stasi report, the brigades were successfully completing their work within the retail outlets. However, these brigades were experiencing difficulties in demonstrating socialist life and learning amongst their fellow workers, and the brigades apparently lacked a clear connection with the *Konsum*'s administration.⁹⁷¹

⁹⁶⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin, June 5, 1959 Bericht: Über den Brigadeeinsatz in der Konsumgenossenschaft Berlin-Mitte, 1-2.

⁹⁶⁹ LAB: C Rep. 904-138 Nr. 6, Informationsbericht für die Zeit vom 28. Oktober bis 3. November 1959.

⁹⁷⁰ SWA: U64/336, Die Konsum-Genossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 34.

⁹⁷¹ BStU - MfS Zentralarchiv 2493/67, Analyse Konsumgenossenschaft - Mitte, Berlin den 8.11.1960, 36.



Illustration 43: A *Konsum* youth brigade in 1977

During the 1960s and 1970s, the brigades were used to create a communal spirit, as is (perhaps) apparent in Illustration 43,⁹⁷² and to take disciplinary action against other group members. Tensions arose when the brigades incorporated educational and controlling roles and rules, which allowed for the reproach of fellow workers for tardiness, absenteeism, and carelessness at their job posts. The brigades also encroached on the members' personal lives; for example, when somebody's child did not perform well at school, the brigade would be informed and make an effort to intervene. In certain situations this may have been helpful, but many felt (correctly) that they were under surveillance by their colleagues. Yet many former members maintained that they had positive memories of their brigades.⁹⁷³

Historian Thomas Lindenberger states, "Instruction brigades can be regarded as containing a central element of [what Michel Foucault describes as] governmentality under state socialism."⁹⁷⁴ More plainly, the SED attempted to manage and produce the appropriate behaviours in an effort to craft self-governing citizens by using disciplinary control at the

⁹⁷² SSC: 30878/1131, A *Konsum* youth brigade in 1977.

⁹⁷³ Madarász, *Working in East Germany*: 29.

⁹⁷⁴ Lindenberger, "Creating State Socialist Governance," 134.

workplace. In this sense, governmentality is about people actively, willingly, and voluntarily participating in the structures that dominate them by being self-governing and self-disciplining in the ways those institutions expected.⁹⁷⁵ In order to secure the new power structures of the SED-state, previously autonomous power centres or nuclei needed to be dissolved, and long-established social and property relations had to be replaced with socialist ones. Lindenberger further suggests “during this process the SED had to establish a firm grip on the people going through this transformation in order to install a durable link between the power centre and the individuals.”⁹⁷⁶ In other words, the brigades were a tool of social pressure and political control in the workplace. Moreover, this pressure forced workers to modify and monitor their own behaviour so that they could actively participate in the socialist state and consumer culture (i.e., governmentality). With all that said, it seems as though the attempts of the SED to politicize the workplace were easily ignored by those uninterested in pursuing career advancement. This was the recollection of a former *Konsum* saleswoman. In a 2011 interview, she stated:

The political role was continually present, although I had no interest in it. I was simply an employee of this organization. It was a job and a way to make money. Yet on account of this politicized workplace, workers intentionally placed a considerable distance between SED managers and themselves. Amongst workers, there was considerable solidarity, especially amongst female employees. Although I felt a sense of loyalty to my co-workers, I was not particularly loyal to the political facets of this organization.⁹⁷⁷

Even though this interview took place over twenty years after the fall of the Wall, the ubiquity of the *Konsum* and the largely unchanging products it sold shaped the cultural memory of the DDR for both its employees and consumers. Historian Paul Betts posits that “there was little variety of goods and little brand-name competition; many of the products introduced in the consumer rush of the ‘60s stayed in production until 1989 with little or no change in content or

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁹⁷⁶ Ibid., 126.

⁹⁷⁷ Author's interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.

form. Regardless of how monotonous this may have been, the aesthetics of sameness was crucial in shaping the DDR's collective memory."⁹⁷⁸ In the case of the anonymous worker, her employment within this organization indicates that her interaction with the *Konsum* became an historical marker that shaped her memory of East German socialism. It is for this reason that the *Konsum* is such an important avenue of study, since it acted as a site and unchanging space that was, in many ways, directly linked to the memories of the majority of the East German population.

9.5. The democratic dictatorship? Co-operative democracy in the workplace

There is evidence suggesting that *Konsum* members held the formal right to vote in leadership elections and on economic policy.⁹⁷⁹ This section examines the democratic participation in the *Konsum*. The SED, for its part, also used *Konsum* elections "to increase the influence of the party within the elected organs of the consumer co-operatives, so that the politics of the party are explained, and for the political mobilization of the consumer co-operatives."⁹⁸⁰ In other words, both citizens and state were attempting to manipulate elections for their own ends.



Illustration 44: An example of the membership book, which was the primary piece of identification for voting in *Konsum* elections⁹⁸¹

⁹⁷⁸ Paul Betts, "The Twilight of the Idols: East German Memory and Material Culture," *The Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 3 (2000): 754.

⁹⁷⁹ Rönnebeck, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften der ehemaligen DDR*: 26-27.

⁹⁸⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/2.029/86, date not given, 13.

⁹⁸¹ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 27-29.

For voting identification, the membership-book had to be approved by an election official and marked with an election stamp. During the selection process, voters could use a closed polling booth. The member with the most votes was elected. The election of the membership committees and the *Konsum* delegates was done on separate ballot sheets. According to the document *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, the high voter turnout was a sign of the strong membership participation in co-operative life, and of members' trust in the honorary functionaries of the membership committees. In the last election (date not given but appears to be 1959), 3.2 million members participated; a number that exceeded ninety percent of the members. They elected around 127,000 members to the *Verkaufsstellenausschüsse* (retail-outlet-membership-committees) and as delegates, among them were 87,000 women. Additionally, there were 25,000 farmers elected in the countryside – apparently this was a sign of the growing strength of co-operative activity.⁹⁸² While there were regular elections, party members were most likely the only potential candidates for election to high management positions within the *Konsum*.

Already in the early 1950s, women were doing very well in *Konsum* elections. In 1950, there were 7,572 elected representatives in the *Verband-sächsischer-Konsumgenossenschaften*, and 4,887 of these were women.⁹⁸³ The 1952 election results at a consumer co-operative in Berlin demonstrated that women were elected into administrative positions. Five men and two women were elected into the *Vorstand*, six men and two women were elected into the *Aufsichtsrat*, twelve men and sixteen women were elected into the *Genossenschaftsrat*. In total twenty-three men and twenty women gained elected positions within the *Konsum*. While men dominated the two upper branches, these numbers demonstrate that women were actively

⁹⁸² SWA: V8/2247, Entwurf Statut der (Dorf-, Stadt-) Konsumgenossenschaft (Date not given), 30.

⁹⁸³ Burchard Bösche and Jan-Frederik Korf, *Chronik der deutschen Konsumgenossenschaften* (Hamburg: Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, 2003), 33.

involved in the various administrative branches of this organization.⁹⁸⁴ In Mecklenburg, co-operators from Liessow and Cambs stood for the 1956 committee elections. The co-operator from Liessow was female, and she won the election.⁹⁸⁵ These numbers demonstrate a willingness on the part of the régime to give women access to real power within the lower- to mid-level administrative positions through elections.

Yet to be elected into the administrative branches of the *Konsum* one needed the proper credentials and biographical background in the form of antifascist resistance, working-class heritage, and membership in the SED. For instance, Otto Leopold was a member of the executive of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig*. He was born in Leipzig in 1901 to a working-class family. In his youth, he was involved in retail trade. After the First World War, he joined the KPD and then became a relentless fighter against “capitalist reactionaries.” From 1933 to 1945, he fought against the Nazis. Given his background, Otto Leopold proved his eligibility to become an executive member of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig*.⁹⁸⁶ Another example was Charlotte Säger who was born in 1907 and the child of a Leipzig worker (*Arbeiterkind*). In her early youth, she was actively involved in the workers’ movement. She was a member of the SED and dedicated to the co-operative movement. Then, she became an active functionary in the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* and was elected to its supervisory committee (*Aufsichtsrat*) on 6 May 1950.⁹⁸⁷ Hans Janke was born in 1901 in Landsberg and was the son of a tailor. He was an active functionary of the working-class movement in his youth. In 1945, he joined the SED. On 1 April 1947, he was elected to the supervisory committee of the *Konsum-*

⁹⁸⁴ LAB: C Rep. 901 Nr. 328, Bericht an das Sekretariat, Berlin, den 14.10.52, 5.

⁹⁸⁵ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 44.

⁹⁸⁶ SWA: 2342/1, Otto Leopold, 1. Vorstandsmitglied der Konsumgenossenschaft Leipzig.

⁹⁸⁷ SWA: 2342/1, Charlotte Säger geb. Keil, geb. 6. Juli 1907.

genossenschaft-Zwickau.⁹⁸⁸ From these biographies, we can speculate that elections were used to push aside politically unreliable members, such as Social Democrats.

A case in point is the elections of various *Konsum* administrative positions over the period from 9 January to 2 March 1975 – the purpose of which was to ensure that suitable cadres were elected into the leading organs of the *Konsum*. During the process of these three elections, the *Konsum* had to promote and demonstrate the fulfillment of the resolutions of the Eighth SED Party Congress.⁹⁸⁹ The most suitable candidates were those with ties to the working-class and the party. These candidates also had to demonstrate that they had political knowledge and were active proponents of the socialist project. Above all, these elections were to increase the influence of women and youth. Ultimately, the elections were also to prove that the *Konsum* realized the resolutions of the Eighth Party Congress of the SED.⁹⁹⁰

Konsum elections had multiple political and propaganda objectives. According to documents from the Stasi archives from 1980, there were scheduled elections for the various leadership positions of the *Konsum*, which were reported to have been held on 17 and 18 January, from 23 February to 9 March, and from 15 March to 30 March 1980.⁹⁹¹ As the document clearly states, “the elections were held to deepen the members’ understanding of the *Konsum* as an antifascist mass-organization, which contributed to the strengthening of socialism. The elections were to also prove that collaboration and friendship with the Soviet Union was the decisive reason for the assurance of peace in the world and the continuing prosperity of the

⁹⁸⁸ SWA: 2342/1, Hans Janke, Obermeister in Böhlen geb. 13.9.1901.

⁹⁸⁹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 551, Direktive über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen leitenden Organe der Konsumgenossenschaften, 3.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁹⁹¹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 599, Direktive zur Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen der leitenden Organe in den Konsumgenossenschaften und Konsumgenossenschaftsverbänden der Bezirke, 2.

DDR.⁹⁹² Furthermore, the *Konsum* elections were used to promote political slogans, the resolutions of the Central Committee of the SED, the electoral announcements of the National Front, and SED ideology.⁹⁹³

A further conclusion from the archival material cited in this subsection is that elections were used to promote the discourse of the SED party congresses and the everyday lexicon of East German socialism (many of these terms were translated directly from Russian and drawn from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). The following are a few examples of some of the more common phrases, metaphors, and slogans found in the material pertaining to *Konsum* elections: *massenpolitische Arbeit* or *politischen Massenarbeit* (ideological work), *Frauenarbeit* (women meeting the obligations of their professional work and societal duties in combination with motherhood), *Bodenreform* (land reform), *Klassenfeind* (class enemy), *Die führende Rolle der Partei der Arbeiterklasse* (The Party of the Workingclass), *Antifaschistischer Schutzwall* (antifascist protection wall – the East German name for the Berlin Wall), *Einheit von Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik* (unity of economic and social policy), and *Schöner unsere Städte und Gemeinden - Mach mit!* (Do your part! Volunteer for the beautification of our cities and communities!).⁹⁹⁴ Some of the particularly popular slogans during the 1989 local and *Konsum* elections were *Hohe Leistungen zum Wohle des Volkes und für den Frieden* (high productivity will ensure the well-being of the people and peace), *alles für die Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des XI. Parteitages der SED* (everything for the realization of the resolutions of the Eleventh

⁹⁹² Ibid., 6.

⁹⁹³ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8994, Information über die Wahlergebnisse der Konsumgenossenschaften bei der Durchführung der Kommunalwahlen am 7. Mai 1989.

⁹⁹⁴ For further explanation on the peculiarities of German spoken in East Germany See: Jan Eik, *DDR-Deutsch: Eine entschwundene Sprache* (Berlin: Jaron Verlag, 2010).

Party Congress), and *Vorwärts zum 40. Jahrestag der DDR!*” (onward to the 40th Anniversary of the DDR).⁹⁹⁵

9.5.1. *Verkaufsstellenausschüsse* (consumer committees)

Members could participate in and be elected to the *Verkaufsstellenausschüsse* (consumer committees). At least on paper, consumer committees, under the elected leadership of the *Konsum* members, were actively involved in the administration of a given retail outlet and were considered (at least according to membership statutes) the most important organ of the *Konsum*. These elected officials were responsible for the development of the democratic self-awareness of the members, for dealing with the criticisms directed at the *Konsum*, and for ensuring the satisfactory supply of members and customers through co-operative trade. These committees were elected yearly by the membership of the given outlet through fair, secret ballot elections. In every retail outlet, at least five members had to be elected to a committee. The committee then elected a head administrator from within. The committees had to meet at least twice a month and were responsible for assuring that members actively participated in the development of consumer culture and supported the introduction of new working methods within their retail outlet. The committees served as a sort of “transmission-belt” between the members and the workers of their given retail outlet and ensured that membership complaints, suggestions, and ideas were taken into consideration by the retail outlet’s workforce and administration.⁹⁹⁶ In this sense, the committees became, metaphorically speaking, lightning rods of consumer complaints.

The consumer committees were committed to the development of the relationship between members, workers, the parties and mass-organization, the committees of the National

⁹⁹⁵ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8993, Programm der politischen Massenarbeit der konsumgenossenschaftlichen Organisation in Vorbereitung der Kommunalwahlen 1989 und des 40. Jahrestages der Gründung der DDR, 152.

⁹⁹⁶ SWA: V8/2247, Entwurf Statut der (Dorf-, Stadt-) Konsumgenossenschaft (Date not given), 28.

Front, and the LPGs.⁹⁹⁷ For example, during the preparations of the 1958 co-operative elections, the party stressed that:

The most important leading organs of the co-operatives were the consumer committees. They have the most direct contact with the members and were the most effective tool in membership control. It was therefore necessary to ensure that more party members from the working-class and farmers were elected into these positions. These newly elected officials had to immediately begin their party tasks.”⁹⁹⁸



Illustration 45: A shop window promoting the elections to the consumer committees in 1954 in Rostock⁹⁹⁹

The Democratic Women's League of Germany (*Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands*, **DFD**)¹⁰⁰⁰ attempted to have its own members elected to the consumer committees in order to have an avenue by which to influence the *Konsum* along with its retail and distribution policies. In 1955, at an SED meeting, women noted the success of the consumer committees in the establishment of a factory store: “We fought for half a year to lengthen the opening hours of the *Konsum* store so that our women could take part in social life and still procure their purchases. Three days a week the *Konsum* firm is open until 7:00pm, and the *Konsum* store in the city of Radeberg is open until 7:00pm on two days as well.”¹⁰⁰¹ For a

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁹⁸ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. Berlin (Date not given), 6.

⁹⁹⁹ AKB: FA 10 - Schaufenster und Fassadengestaltung zu gesellschaftlichen Höhepunkten und politischen Themen, Verband Deutscher Konsum-Genossenschaften, Warenhaus Rostock, 1954.

¹⁰⁰⁰ The DFD was established as a mass women's organization in March 1947 and attempted to re-educate women in the spirit of antifascism. It was one of the members of the National Front and sent representatives to the *Volkskammer*.

¹⁰⁰¹ Comment by Anneliese Kraft: Sachbearbeiterin für Sozialpolitik VEB Sachsenwerk Radeberg Bezirk Dresden in Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Zentralkomitee, Frauen schaffen für das neue Leben, 25, as quoted in Pence, "The Myth of a Suspended Present," 150.

further illustration of DFD influence in the Konsum, on 24 July 1973 the two mass-organizations joined forces to write an *Eingabe* to the president of the VDK, Dr. Fahrenkrog. In this letter, they requested the modernization of cash registers in order to guarantee quicker service for customers. The motivation for the request was to avoid further confrontations with displeased customers over having to wait in line for so long, which the *Konsum* employees could no longer accept.¹⁰⁰² Historian Katherine Pence has stated that “as mass-organizations tied to the SED, the DFD and the *Konsum* tried to shape women as consumers who maintained faith in the régime’s policies and helped the régime overcome shortages by filling in where goods were in short supply with their own extra labour and management skills.”¹⁰⁰³

The members of these committees were active in all of the *Konsum*’s restaurants and retail outlets. Day by day, they volunteered numerous hours of their free time to undertake tedious work (*Kleinarbeit*) for their co-operative. Their pay was not monetary; rather, it apparently came in the form of the flourishing of the co-operative, of which they were (at least according to a *Konsum* archival document) “extremely proud.”¹⁰⁰⁴ Members had to ensure that there were adequate working conditions and a suitable assortment of goods for sale. At the end of the year, they were also asked to volunteer to clean the shop and do inventory. The members also helped in other practical ways. If there were personnel shortages, these volunteers were asked to step in. Of course, there were other advantages to being a member, since it was most likely easier for the volunteers on these committees to gain better access to the goods sold in their retail outlets, as well as firsthand knowledge when new goods became available.

¹⁰⁰² TSM: BV Suhl - Konsum, Nr. 1157, Eingabe an den Herrn Präsidenten Dr. Fahrenkrog, 24. Juli 1973.

¹⁰⁰³ Pence, "From Rations to Fashions," 455-56.

¹⁰⁰⁴ SWA: U64/336, (Date not given - probably 1959 or the early 1960s), 32.

Furthermore, voluntary functionaries had better access to the *Konsum*'s educational network and cultural activities, such as choirs, dance groups, theatre productions, and music groups.¹⁰⁰⁵

In speaking about the shop committees, VDK President (1967 to 1991), Heinz Fahrenkrog stated in a 1975 report:

Their primary function is to represent the interests of the members and to see to it that the shop and restaurant staff live up to the standards of work expected of them by the members and customers, which means that they had to remain in constant contact with the members, to know their opinions, and at the same time to work together with the staff on comradely terms, not only giving them good advice but also helping them through practical deeds. This also means helping out in a pinch and getting members to help when it comes to redecorating or remodelling a shop.¹⁰⁰⁶

At least 200,000 *Konsum* members were members of the shop committees, as well as the advisory committees in the branch department, the co-operative councils, the auditing commissions and the executive. Fahrenkrog continues:

These members had exerted a direct influence on the development of their co-operative organization as the members' elected representatives. All these representatives were elected by direct and secret ballot. In addition, hundreds of thousands of members took advantage of the members' meetings and delegates' conferences of consumers' co-operatives and associations to express their interests, demands and constructive criticisms on how to improve the sales and supply services of the co-operatives.¹⁰⁰⁷

To quote him again at length, Fahrenkrog postulates:

It was interesting to note who attended these meetings. Most of the people attending the meetings were interested members. But occasionally the burgomaster of the town or community in question takes the floor to elucidate the economic and communal tasks of the community. The chairman of the local branch of the Democratic Women's League of Germany often takes advantage of the opportunity to discuss relevant problems, because the majority of those present were women. Thus, members' meetings were, in many cases, forums of the community or city district concerned. It goes without saying that the members themselves took the greatest advantage of the meetings to discuss problems and to put forward suggestions. At such meetings the members can arrive at a common position on certain questions, which they then put through vis-à-vis the sales staff of the shop in question. But the members' meeting can also call on the executive to

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰⁶ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, *The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic*, 41.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Ibid., 50.

include a certain problem it wanted dealt with on this committee's agenda. Each member also had the opportunity to go directly to the executive and speak to the director during the calling-hours or to his shop committee. Complaint books were accessible to customers in all co-operative establishments.¹⁰⁰⁸

Given Fahrenkrog's position, this account likely idealizes the assemblies and describes how the regime or the president wanted them to appear. Reading between the lines, the source reflects a common pattern, namely the idealized appearance of how things were supposed to have been rather than how they actually were.

Voters were able to use the consumer committees and their elections as a means by which to express their displeasure with consumption and the state and possibly gain a voice in a dictatorial state. The majority of those elected to the consumer committees were women. During the elections to the retail outlets in early September 1985, 151,165 members (among them were 128,706 women) were elected to 14,931 small party cells (*Grundorganisation*).¹⁰⁰⁹ Prior to elections, the candidates for consumer committees had to partake in discussions and meetings with workers and voters, during which voters were allowed to vent. For instance, prior to the election of consumer committees in Berlin on 21 and 22 January 1988, multiple members used the opportunity to express their displeasure with and criticize the *Konsum*'s assortment of goods, the debasement of baked goods through transport, industrial packaging, and insufficient labelling, and pricing.¹⁰¹⁰ And during elections for 7 May 1989, voters demanded improvements to retail conditions, as well as more customer-friendly store hours.¹⁰¹¹

Based on the aforementioned Fahrenkrog quotation and the general evidence presented in this sub-section, this voluntarism and democratic participation in the *Konsum* was likely used as

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁰⁹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8990: Information zur Wahl der Verkaufsstellenausschüsse und Beiräte in den Konsumgenossenschaften, 9. September 1985, 233.

¹⁰¹⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8993: Information über die Wahlen der Verkaufsstellenausschüsse und Beiräte, Berlin 25 Januar 1988, 174.

¹⁰¹¹ SAPMO-BA: DY/30 8994, Information über die Vorbereitung der Kommunalwahlen am 7. Mai 1989 durch die Konsumgenossenschaften der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 135-36.

a forum to exert social pressure and control by monitoring the mood of the population and recording the presence or absenteeism of members at meetings and *Konsum* sponsored activities. Knowing this, East Germans purposefully volunteered in order to benefit themselves. By officially volunteering and having their volunteer hours registered at the *Konsum*, they were demonstrating that they were active and committed socialist citizens. The attendance records were then used to their individual advantage when developing the proper biographical credentials (a great advantage when trying to acquire consumer goods, such as an apartment, car, and so on). This collective voluntarism was also a means by which to establish good relations and secure favours, which in many respects became the real currency used in the DDR.

9.6. Conclusions

According to Witho Holland, “the inclusion of the *Konsum* in the centrally planned economy and the system of democratic centralism offered the consumer co-operatives numerous possibilities for self-responsibility in determining their economic contributions.”¹⁰¹² As Holland claims, they were, at least by the late 1980s, given a semblance of independence. Although the *Konsum*’s economic plans were designed to support and legitimize the SED system, its semi-independence allowed members and workers to make real contributions in determining their design and implementation.¹⁰¹³ Holland further suggests, “The consumer co-operatives of the SBZ and DDR had co-operative characteristics, which were in accordance with co-operative law.”¹⁰¹⁴ What is important here is that the *Konsum*’s legal structures allowed for members and workers to make real (democratic) contributions to running this organization. Dr. Burchard Bösche (an executive within the Hamburg based *Zentralverband deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften*) states, “The consumer committees, comprised of ten to fifteen members, were

¹⁰¹² Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 64.

¹⁰¹³ Ibid.

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid., 78.

democratically elected and helped formulate basic policy within the retail outlets, as well as ensuring that these shops ran and functioned properly. Nevertheless, the SED completely dominated the upper levels of this organization.”¹⁰¹⁵ That is, the president, the executive, and the leading functionaries were all members of the SED. Consequently, the *Konsum* was under the direct control of the party, even though there was some democratic activity in the lower levels of the organization within the consumer committees.¹⁰¹⁶

There are a number of other conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence presented in this chapter. With respect to *Konsum* democracy and elections, Aschhoff and Henningsen aptly state “[East German co-operative] members, of whom there were several millions, were able to take part in a rudimentary type of self-administration in retail outlet committees and councils.”¹⁰¹⁷ Aschhoff and Henningsen are correct in arguing that the *Konsum* elections were – at times – relatively fair and free. Yet the SED and the *Konsum* used elections as an instrument by which to ensure that the right types of people, usually party members but not always, were able to attain administrative positions, while purging those considered unsuitable candidates (usually former social democrats) by not allowing them to run in elections. Further, the party always controlled the message or slogans of a given election, such as the sustained friendship between the Soviet Union and the DDR or supporting and promoting the objectives of the most recent SED congress. As such, *Konsum* elections became a forum through which socialist discourse and political metaphors were promulgated.

East German co-operatives may, in fact, have been more progressive than western co-operatives. In Katarina Apelqvist’s 1996 article, “Strategies for Shared Power between Men and

¹⁰¹⁵ Author's interview with Dr. Burchard Bösche, Hamburg, Germany, 26 July 2011.

¹⁰¹⁶ Author's interview with anonymous (former DDR school teacher and *Konsum* employee), Berlin, Germany, 27 June 2011.

¹⁰¹⁷ Aschhoff and Henningsen, *The German Cooperative System*: 45.

Women in Co-operatives,” she argues that women have been integral in the development of “western” co-operatives; however, they continue to play a subordinate role within the movement, with restricted access to status and power. Women’s lack of power in the co-operatives was most strikingly apparent in the decision-making organs of the ICA.¹⁰¹⁸ In her words,

Irrespective of the country, co-operatives were essentially managed by men. In fact, gender imbalance in co-operatives was one of the striking contradictions between co-operative theory and practice, weakening co-operative identity, credibility and the possibilities to fulfill co-operative purpose. The present co-operative order has been engineered by men, for men. Consequently it is based on male values, norms and priorities. Admittedly there were women within these male hierarchies but their influence and opportunities for development were restricted. Furthermore, their salaries were lower than men’s even when they did the same and comparable work.¹⁰¹⁹

In another article published in the same issue by Maria-Elena Chaves, the author argues that “the little statistical evidence presently available on women co-operators in decision-making positions shows that women were not yet adequately represented in the ranks of power, policy and decision-making.”¹⁰²⁰ Finally, Johnston Birchall has argued, “for generations women have played a vital, but invisible, role in co-operatives... they have constituted the loyal and hardworking backbone of the movement [but] have been, and still are, kept in subordinate roles.”¹⁰²¹

Of course, these are opinion pieces and the authors do not use substantial quantitative data to buttress their arguments. With the *Konsum*, however, women did dominate, at least numerically, especially in the retail outlets and in the factories. And to an extent, women were also able to use the consumer-committees and the rudimentary democracy that the *Konsum* offered to its employees to have their voices heard in the realm of East German consumer culture

¹⁰¹⁸ Katarina Apelqvist, “Strategies for Shared Power between Men and Women in Co-operatives,” *Review of International Co-operation* 89, no. 1 (1996): 28.

¹⁰¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰²⁰ MariaElena Chavez, “The Role of the ICA in the Advancement of Women in Co-operatives ” *Review of International Co-operation* 89, no. 1 (1996): 49.

¹⁰²¹ Birchall, *The international co-operative movement*: 226.

and in the workplace. With that said, further study is needed that contrasts female co-operative work in West Germany with that in East Germany. In Part IV, avenues for future research are discussed in greater detail.

PART IV: CONCLUSIONS, APPENDICES, AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

10. Final thoughts

During the *Wende*, there was a collision of East and West: *Frauen, Ossis, Konsum* (Women, East Germans, and Consumer Co-operatives) versus “*Männer, Wessis, Handelsketten* (Men, West Germans, and sales chains).

Sigrid Hebestreit, an employee of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Weimar*¹⁰²²

Following the *Wende*, the HO and others went kaput, but the *Konsum* remained. This made us proud.

Martin Tänzer, a former deputy from the Department of Commerce¹⁰²³



Illustration 46: An advertising image produced by Erich Schmitt in the 1960s celebrating the long history of consumer co-operatives in Berlin

The slogan attached to this image is written in exaggerated Berlin accent: “Also ick bin schon die dritte Jeneration von uns, die im KONSUM kooft (I belong to third generation, who has shopped in the *Konsum*).”¹⁰²⁴

¹⁰²² Bollwahn, *Frauengenossenschaften-Genossenschaftsfrauen*: 25-26.

¹⁰²³ Bösche, "7.2. Interview with Manfred Reimann and Martin Tänzer," 82.

¹⁰²⁴ Erich Schmitt, "Konsum Berlin 1899 - 28.Juni - 1999," (Berlin: Konsum Berlin).

This dissertation discussed the roles of the *Konsum*, while alluding to the nature of power relations in East Germany, Soviet-style socialism, and the tensions between the modernist and totalitarian elements of the socialist construction in East Germany. What is more, this dissertation is the first English, in-depth study of the *Konsum*; for this reason, it is my hope that it will make an original contribution to the historiography of the SBZ and DDR. It examined the ways in which the *Konsum* contributed to the SED's highly modern and totalitarian aspirations to create a socialist society comprised of new socialist citizens. In examining the SED's ability to use the *Konsum* to infuse ideology into everyday life, this study provides new understandings of the ways in which the party's actions affected its citizens, and the ways in which citizens responded to, averted, and manipulated the SED's politicization of their daily lives. To this end, the study has drawn attention to the state's incursion into the mundane aspects of everyday life in the realms of education, work, and consumption. To substantiate this examination, I have referred to numerous archival sources and interviews with East Germans associated with the *Konsum*.

10.1. What was the *Konsum*?

It is difficult to classify and define the *Konsum*, especially given its ambivalent character as an economic and political mass-organization, but also as an organization that was important to the daily lives of its millions of members all the while maintaining some co-operative structures.¹⁰²⁵ According to the statistics, the *Konsum* was something of a success story during the Soviet occupation (1945 to 1949) and the lifespan of the East German state (1949 to 1990). Indeed, the *Konsum* was an important retail and trade institution, with a turnover rate of forty

¹⁰²⁵ Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR," 813.

billion MdN, 2.3 billion MdN in net profits, and 6.6 billion MdN in fixed assets in 1989.¹⁰²⁶ In spite of these apparent successes, archival sources and witnesses give conflicting perspectives in respect to the economic and political importance of the *Konsum*, making it problematic to distinguish between party rhetoric and actual East German co-operative practice and productive capacity. However, from the sources available and in all the ways I have been suggesting, it is possible to recognize that the SED attempted to use the *Konsum* as a propaganda instrument. *Eingaben* and interviews provide a relatively representative picture of the reaction of the citizenry, which was generally venting or feigned compliance for individual gain.

Historian Ulrich Kurzer implies that by the 1960s the political and educational influence of the *Konsum* had been somewhat downgraded; at this time the *Konsum* began to focus instead almost exclusively on its economic role, namely supplying of the population.¹⁰²⁷ I disagree with this argument. In my view, what Kurzer is likely picking up on are shifts in political slogans and discourse. And even if the *Konsum* focused more exclusively on supply, consumption was so highly politicized that it is not possible to differentiate between politics and economics since they were one and the same in the DDR. As Helmut Lehmann, member of the SED Central Committee, proclaimed in mid-1947, “the consumer co-operative has to make clear to women that every product she purchased was a political product.”¹⁰²⁸ For this reason, I have emphatically argued that the *Konsum*’s basic economic roles were always interwoven with the political objectives of education, persuasion, and pacification. This meant that the *Konsum*’s basic function as a political mass-organization or as a “transmission-belt” of SED discourse was relatively static, although there were marked shifts in the messages, slogans, and styles of the propaganda.

¹⁰²⁶ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 77-78.

¹⁰²⁷ Kurzer, "Konsumgenossenschaften in der Sowjetischen Zone und in der DDR," 815-20.

¹⁰²⁸ Schwenger, "Konsumgenossenschaften," 774.

To return to the idea of Althusser's conceptualization of an Ideological State Apparatus, "if the ISAs 'function' massively and predominantly by ideology, what unifies their diversity is precisely this functioning, insofar as the ideology by which they function is always in fact unified, despite its diversity and its contradictions, *beneath the ruling ideology*, which is the ideology of 'the ruling class.'"¹⁰²⁹ The ideology (the ideas, the language, worldview, organizational structure, symbols, and meanings) at the core of the *Konsum* was always that of the ruling SED. Nevertheless, the *Konsum* was still a contested terrain between the people and the state, substantial numbers of members on one hand and the administrators, party officials, and security informants on the other.

The *Konsum* was, above all, a state-retailer and state-controlled distributor in DDR society. But to complicate this, the state played a dangerous game by gambling much of its fledgling legitimacy on the allocation of consumer goods to its citizens and, by extension, the *Konsum*'s performance. In other words, as a state distributor, it delivered overly stylized and exaggerated propaganda promises that the command economy could rarely deliver. Ironically, then, whenever an East German patronized a *Konsum* outlet, he or she was hit with a dose of ideology heavily contrasted with the austere realities of daily consumption.

10.1.1. Totalitarian, progressive, and modern instrument

Were the *Konsum* and, more broadly, the DDR, totalitarian, modern, and progressive? One must answer, albeit cautiously, in the affirmative. The DDR was a state that had progressive and modern ends, although they were conceived through totalitarian means. East Germans, however, experienced the means and ends in different ways. Some felt the full weight of the East German security services (*Konsum* workers and students were no exception to this), while others were able to take advantage of and use the state's progressive rhetoric as a weapon

¹⁰²⁹ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 28.

to have their demands met. The *Konsum* clearly demonstrates this. In short, the paper trail the *Konsum* left behind encapsulates the extent of the permeation of the SED-party-state into the experiences of work, education, and consumption to achieve both modern and totalitarian ends. For instance, the *Konsum* promoted the régime's modernizing tendencies, especially through its support of female employment and education, while monitoring its consumers, members, and employees.

Whenever citizens shopped in co-operative sales outlets, participated in the *Konsum*'s cultural activities, political meetings, elections, and educational courses, they were exposed to and participated in the power structures of the SED. *Konsum* workers and members were almost certainly influenced to some degree by the influx of SED ideology into their places of work and their consumption practices. This notwithstanding, the state was not always able to infiltrate the spaces that East Germans demarcated for themselves. *Konsum* documents confirm that many citizens became consumer-tacticians by appropriating state-party-rhetoric for the fulfillment of their own ideas, aspirations, and agendas during the forced sovietisation of eastern Germany and the forty-year rule of the SED.¹⁰³⁰

Within the context of this dissertation, totalitarianism means that the system exposed people systematically to state ideology and got them, especially the *Konsum* leaders, members, workers, and consumers, to use its language in a symbolic gesture of outward conformity. Perhaps the purpose of totalitarianism, therefore, is to ensure a performance of compliance (something akin to James Scott's public transcript), even though the majority of citizens were likely only engaged in such posturing to either avoid confrontation with the armed-wing of the state, or to gain personal advantage. When East Germans failed to uphold the veneer of outward conformity, the state, or as shown in this dissertation, the Stasi would directly intervene by

¹⁰³⁰ Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots*: 203-05.

codifying the suspected person with a range of categories, which had real and significant consequences in respect to one's career and education.

10.1.2. A junction of politicized consumption, observation, and propaganda

Independent initiative and agency were constant deterrents to the SED's economic and political goals. Everyday reality in the DDR was, on the one hand, a mixture of ideologically driven intervention and observation (totalitarian), and, on the other hand, the unpredictable actions of individuals reacting, manipulating, and opposing these state-driven initiatives through selective participation. To placate these demands and gain support for the socialist system of rule, the SED instructed the *Konsum* to improve the population's access to desired goods. In fact, Stasi documentation clearly demonstrates that the party was reporting on and reacting to individual demands for improved consumption. In this sense, the Stasi was acting as a liaison between state and consumers, which was a truly unique role for an Orwellian secret police force. In other words, the SED wanted the *Konsum* to foster an enjoyable consumer culture to promote and legitimize its rule, whereas the Stasi wanted to use the *Konsum* as a means to monitor the mood of the population while simultaneously creating an enjoyable consumer culture to quell and remove any possible motivation for dissension. In order to increase the population's commitment to the SED, the party ordered the consumer co-operatives to produce goods that would please its customers.¹⁰³¹ As previous chapters have shown, the party attempted to demonstrate the success of its planned economy in the *Konsum* shop window displays.

Throughout the entire history of the DDR, consumption was always a symbolic political issue. The *Konsum* attempted to maintain and promote the East German state narrative by propagating symbols of common DDR identity and socialist discourse through consumption,

¹⁰³¹ BStU - Archiv der Zentralstelle: MfS SED-KL 551, Direktive über die Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Wahlen leitenden Organe der Konsumgenossenschaften, 3-5.

which was, as the state correctly believed, a key to garnering consensus amongst its citizens. Within the sphere of East German consumption, there were always intense debates and consequences for the SED, since the SED controlled the production and design of commodities for daily consumption. The governing bodies of the state were involved in the development of goods ranging from butter and sugar cubes to women's clothing and children's socks, with the intent to ensure that all of these goods symbolized SED ideology, modernity, and, most importantly, the successes of a highly-industrialized socialist society.¹⁰³² As discussed throughout this dissertation, the images of antifascism, modernity, and industrial progress were crucial to the establishment of an East German national narrative designed to break from the legacies of Nazism. The *Konsum*, therefore, attempted to promote and support the SED's modernist state-narrative by guaranteeing employment and a modest level of consumption, with generally satisfactory access to cheap staple goods such as meat and bread.

A substantial number of women experienced socialism through consumption and employment within the *Konsum* retail outlets. Thus, the state's political legitimacy was, at some level, based on the female shopping and working experiences at *Konsum* stores. Unfortunately for the *Konsum* and the SED, these female consumers compared their standard of living with the West rather than with other Eastern Bloc countries, though the DDR had the highest standard of living within the Soviet Bloc. Consumption became central to the conflict between the two German states during the Cold War. In fact, attempts to improve consumption within the *Konsum* stores were designed to demonstrate to East Germans that their lives were improving and that the socialist system was overtaking the West. Ultimately, these attempts failed and by 1989 East Germans showed that they were no longer invested in the socialist experiment.

¹⁰³² Haikal, *Gute Geschäfte*: 166.

10.1.3. Women's organization and workplace

The SED and *Konsum* officials perceived women as consumers, mothers, workers, and supporters of the socialist state (*Frauenarbeit*). Women were able to use their memberships and status as female socialist workers to actively participate in the *Konsum* elections of the *Vorstände* (executive committee) and *Aufsichtsräte* (supervisory committee).¹⁰³³ In turn, the state used co-operatives as a tool to politicize female consumption, female education, and female employment. This was in sharp contrast to the postwar experiences of West German women, who were, to make a broad generalization, expected to return to their prewar realm of the kitchen, church, and children (*Küche, Kirche, und Kinder*) – to accept, in sum, the re-emergence of long-standing gender roles. Internal party documents cited throughout this dissertation demonstrate the party's willingness to apply pressure on the *Konsum* to include women in wage labour, political life, and managerial positions.

The *Konsum*'s role in integrating women was always central. In fact, this suggests that the organization – in spite of the wider geopolitical and cultural shifts – remained intact and alludes to the static and monolithic nature of this organization and its approach to women.

10.1.4. Mass-organization and propaganda apparatus

From the perspective of the party, the *Konsum* was a mass-organization. More particularly, the SED believed that under socialist conditions the *Konsum* had developed from a consumer co-operative into a socialist co-operative and a mass-organization.¹⁰³⁴ According to Wilhelm Kaltenborn, however, “the co-operatives should not be defined in this manner, since

¹⁰³³ SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, Abschrift: “Entschließung” (Date not given), 47.

¹⁰³⁴ SSL: 20237 Bezirkstag und Rat des Bezirkes Leipzig Nr. 1896, Entschließung der 6. Genossenschaftsratstagung des KGV Bezirk Leipzig, Leipzig, am 28. Februar 1958, 1.

they were not an effective mobilising force, and their propaganda efforts were unsuccessful.”¹⁰³⁵ He further argues, “Individuals were able to ignore propaganda and resist the totalitarian aspects of the régime.”¹⁰³⁶ According to Martin Bergner, a former *Konsum* economist and current spokesman for the *Zentralkonsum* (the successor organization of the VDK), “the *Konsum* was not involved in propaganda; rather it was a familiar organization that maintained its co-operative integrity.”¹⁰³⁷

This dissertation has militated against Bergner and Kaltenborn’s reasoning for the simple reason that all consumption in East Germany was politically and propagandistically charged. More specifically, the *Konsum* was able to control the politicized message of consumption and deliver SED propaganda to target groups (*Zielgruppen*), including women, youth, and rural inhabitants in an attempt to bring them ideologically closer to the régime. As evidence for this argument, I have referred to politicized membership meetings and cultural activities, as well as to the propagandized shop window displays. More importantly, as an institution that was in control of a third of East German retail, the *Konsum* was in the powerful position of controlling the ideas and ideology behind socialist consumption in nearly every community in East Germany, regardless of size. The *Konsum*’s omnipresence consisted of an outlet in nearly every town and village totalling 21,000 retail outlets and 544 department stores, as well as 399 stores that sold agricultural goods.¹⁰³⁸ Through the control of the circulation of goods, the *Konsum* was in a position to influence the ideas that were embodied in the commodities it sold and produced, and ultimately the people who sold, produced, and consumed them.¹⁰³⁹ Ironically, with economic

¹⁰³⁵ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 35.

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰³⁷ Author's interview with Martin Bergner, Berlin, Germany, 18 August 2011.

¹⁰³⁸ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 28.

¹⁰³⁹ Ibid.

shortages and unfulfilled consumer desires, the message delivered to consumers and members often led to frustration.¹⁰⁴⁰

Even though the *Konsum* was ubiquitous, its blatant propaganda displays in thousands of *Konsum* retail outlets went, presumably, largely ignored. For example, a former *Konsum* saleswoman asserted that “the propaganda displayed in the *Konsum* did not have an impact on me and it was not an effective form of propaganda.”¹⁰⁴¹ Of course, it is impossible to measure exactly the impact of propaganda on its targeted receivers. Instead, I have attempted to argue that the entire *Konsum* organization and the forms of consumption it promoted and provided were evident in the propaganda displays, which reified the socialist project and propagated the broader antifascist state narrative. In this regard, the *Konsum*’s propaganda was widespread, but its impact was mixed. According to the statutes of rural and urban consumer co-operatives, one of the primary tasks of the *Konsum* was the mobilization and education of a growing membership for the following aims: the struggle for peace, the democratic unity of Germany, the “building of socialism” (i.e., Sovietisation of the DDR in the 1950s), the fulfillment of the *Konsum*’s tasks in relation to the state’s economic plans, and the continual strengthening of the alliance between the working-classes and the working farmers. Mention is also made in archival documents that the *Konsum* had to popularize and implement the politics of the SED in all areas of political, societal, and economic life.¹⁰⁴²

Nonetheless, members were assigned a number of rights and there were democratic practices, although mostly in the lower levels of the *Konsum*’s administration and within the membership committees. Furthermore, during the monthly membership meetings, members had the right to criticize the performance of the *Konsum* and its functionaries, as well as to make

¹⁰⁴⁰ Author's interview with Ullrich Fitzkow, Brunkau, Germany, 18 April 2011.

¹⁰⁴¹ Author's interview with anonymous (former *Konsum* Saleswoman), Essingen, Germany, 2011.

¹⁰⁴² SWA: V8/2247, Entwurf Statut der (Dorf-, Stadt-) Konsumgenossenschaft (Date not given), 2.

suggestions for improvements that could be used in the interest of the organization. These criticisms, ideas, and suggestions were all to be passed onto the various organs of the *Konsum*, including the *Kreisverband* (district association), *Bezirksverband* (regional association), and the VDK.¹⁰⁴³

The *Wende*, literally meaning change or turn, marks East Germany's transitional period from the socialist political system and planned economy to a market economy and democracy from around 1989 and 1990. During this short period of time, there was a general examination of all DDR mass-organizations; it was conducted by the West German Ministry of the Interior in order to determine if the given mass-organization was tightly connected with the SED, and whether its property needed to fall within the authority of the *Treuhand* (an agency charged with managing, and, if possible, privatizing the property of the former DDR). On 17 October 1991, it was determined that the *Konsum*, although it did have a mass membership and served many functions of a mass-organization by serving as a sort of school of "socialist democracy," was not a political mass-organization like the Free German Youth, the Free German Trade Union, the German Democratic Women's League, and the German cultural League. The *Konsum* did not have a bloc of representatives in the *Volkskammer* (Parliament of the DDR) and was thus considered a separate organization and private enterprise.¹⁰⁴⁴ Moreover, thanks to many of the co-operative legal structures maintained by the *Konsum* following its re-founding in 1945, it was recognized as a private industry that remained under the ownership and control of its members.¹⁰⁴⁵ Ultimately, this meant that the *Konsum* was allowed to remain intact. Yet the

¹⁰⁴³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 78.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 63.

question remained as to whether or not the *Konsum* could survive as an independent and private enterprise following the *Wende*.¹⁰⁴⁶

10.2. The *Konsum* in the post-*Wende* period

The *Wende* included the Peaceful Revolution (*Friedliche Revolution*) in the autumn of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, democratic elections to the People's Chamber (*Volkskammer*) on 18 March 1990, and the formal unification of East and West Germany on 3 October 1990. However, this did not complete the process of unification, which is still underway and is often referred to as the post-*Wende* period (*Nachwendezeit*). To this day, the successor of the *Konsum* – the *Zentralkonsum* – and its co-operatives remain competitive in some towns and cities of the former DDR. The *Zentralkonsum* continues to serve a membership base of around 286,500 members.¹⁰⁴⁷ For instance, the consumer co-operative in Eilenburg was able to survive the *Wende*. It has since found a retail niche in which it sells many former East German products.¹⁰⁴⁸ In Weimar, the local co-op is the largest private employer. *Konsum* Dresden is the largest grocery market in the city and the significant private employer in the city. In Leipzig, the local co-operative won an award as supermarket of the year, and in 2006 it hosted a fair with more than 40,000 guests.¹⁰⁴⁹ Currently, there are a number of former *Konsum* co-operatives that continue to operate in the countryside – the largest of which is the PUG VARIO Kauf eG in the Altmark (a region of northern Saxony-Anhalt). It operates stores in the former districts (*Kreis*) of Klötze, Gardelegen, Stendal, and Halberstadt. The adjustments needed for the

¹⁰⁴⁶ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 113.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Dana Micke, Constanze Treuber, and Steffen Uhlmann, "Zentralkonsum: Konzern der Genossen," *W & M-Extra: Zentralkonsum*, 30.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 137.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Wilhelm Kaltenborn, ">>Die Entwicklung der Konsumgenossenschaften nach 1990<<," in *Konsum. Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR* ed. Andreas Ludwig (Weimar Böhlau, 2006), 189.

survival of these co-operatives was difficult and their very survival was especially precarious during the initial years of the post-*Wende* period.¹⁰⁵⁰

10.2.1. The *Konsum* adjusts to the free market

The changes brought about by the *Wende* led to radical transformations for the *Konsum*, especially the conversion from the command economy to the free market and the introduction of supply-and-demand price controls. This meant a substantial number of smaller and unprofitable outlets were closed in order to allow for the survival and the modernization of larger and potentially more profitable stores.¹⁰⁵¹ During this transitional phase, the *Konsum*'s surviving industries had to compete against West German firms. Given the bankruptcy of several consumer co-operatives, it is hardly surprising that the number of *Konsum* outlets and employees declined.¹⁰⁵² By the time the régime began to collapse in 1989, the *Konsum* over-employed 240,000 workers.¹⁰⁵³ Following the *Wende*, the co-operative stores had to eliminate the common East German practice of over-employment, because, on average, each store had seven employees, which was three times that of a similar operation in West Germany. In reality, due to the loss of profit, the consumer co-operatives could no longer pay for such a large workforce. Thus, from 1990 to 1992, the consumer co-operatives shed three quarters of their former personnel.¹⁰⁵⁴ The remaining personnel had to be re-trained for the new tasks and responsibilities of running a business in a western-style market economy, including becoming familiar with computers.¹⁰⁵⁵ In fact, the top administrative branch of the *Konsum* (the VDK) reacted to the new supply and demand economic realities by closing unprofitable stores and

¹⁰⁵⁰ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 49.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁵² Fairbairn, "Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften," 196-98.

¹⁰⁵³ Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*: 33-34.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 53.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Kaltenborn, ">>Die Entwicklung der Konsumgenossenschaften nach 1990<<," 182.

offering a new assortment of goods with new prices, but in most cases the DDR's retail network was overwhelmed by the new pricing system.¹⁰⁵⁶ The *modus operandi* of the *Konsum* was useless in the new market conditions. For that reason, during this transitional period, the administration of the VDK focused on fulfilling its provisional contracts in order to avoid panic and to maintain the loyalty of its members.¹⁰⁵⁷

The VDK reacted quickly to the rapidly unfolding economic and political transformation of the DDR. The *Konsum*'s planned course of action, however, was unable to keep pace with the rapid tempo of change. In the search for new methods of survival, the consumer co-operatives had to develop various concepts at various administrative levels to ensure that the organization had a future. For example, every co-operative had to find a new wholesaler (this meant having to buy and sell an entirely new assortment of goods to customers), all the while improving shopping conditions, and calculating prices on the basis of the market principle of supply and demand.¹⁰⁵⁸ The VDK perceived the political and economic changes as an opportunity to fundamentally restore and renew the co-operative organization. The VDK's goal was nothing less than the establishment of an efficiently run firm that provided affordable and environmentally sound products.¹⁰⁵⁹

10.2.2. Membership loss and eventual stabilization

Many customers and members no longer wanted to shop at the *Konsum* following the *Wende* because of the frequent shortages and the endless hours of waiting in line.¹⁰⁶⁰ Between 1991 and 1996, the consumer co-operatives lost over a fifth of their members; the highpoint of this decline was in 1993. That year, in the recently reunified German state, there were sixty-

¹⁰⁵⁶ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 49-50.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 119.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 15.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.

seven consumer co-operatives: twenty-eight of which were in the west with 600,000 members (Dortmund-Kassel alone had 500,000) and thirty-nine in the east with two million members.¹⁰⁶¹

The loss of approximately 30,000 members meant the haemorrhaging of approximately 1.5 billion MdN of in-store capital. By 1998, the consumer co-operatives had only a fifth of their original members.¹⁰⁶² In the countryside, the *Konsum*'s business plan was the preservation of rural co-operative stores. However, in the Altmark (an historic region in what is today north-central Germany, comprising the northern third of Saxony-Anhalt), which is sparsely populated, a number of larger stores such as METRO, Edeka, and REWE established themselves. EDEKA and REWE are West German co-operatives, but not consumer co-operatives; private shopkeepers own them co-operatively. The smaller *Konsum* centres were unable to compete with these larger retailers. The consequence of this was the closing of a number of stores that reduced the standard of living in smaller towns.¹⁰⁶³ Nevertheless, there are fourteen surviving consumer co-operatives in the former DDR, with a combined membership of over 300,000, over 4,000 employees in almost 500 stores, and a turnover rate of 400 Million Euros. Nearly half of the leading positions within these co-operatives continue to be filled by women.¹⁰⁶⁴ Moreover, the *Konsum* committed resources to the expansion of its successful tourism branch and to the creation of new travel agencies. In fact, the *Konsum* was eventually able to expand into West Berlin and took over 122 West German co-operatives.¹⁰⁶⁵ Some of the *Konsum* co-operatives and factories have successfully adapted to the market economy. For instance, the consumer co-operatives in Magdeburg and the surrounding area still produce baked goods. The two largest former *Konsum* factories continue to profitably produce brushes and *Rostfein* (a brand of coffee).

¹⁰⁶¹ Fairbairn, "Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften," 196-98.

¹⁰⁶² Laschewski and Schulze, *Konsum im Wandel*, 42: 32-33.

¹⁰⁶³ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 49.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Kaltenborn, ">>Die Entwicklung der Konsumgenossenschaften nach 1990<<," 185-89.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90*: 54-55.

In Thuringia, two more subsidiaries of the VDK have flourished: the *Berghotel* (Mountain Hotel) in Oberhof and the *Romantik Hotel Dorotheenhof* (Romantic Hotel) in Weimar.¹⁰⁶⁶

Since the *Wende*, the *Konsum* has adopted a multi-pronged approach to advertising and communication with its members and consumers. The *Konsum* continues to have instant name-recognition for former DDR-citizens, especially amongst those who lived in the countryside, by drawing upon its long history as a quality retailer for the working-class. Some customers believed and continue to believe that the *Konsum* shops go beyond merely capitalist profit and continue to function as reliable retail outlets. Not surprisingly, after the *Wende*, the *Konsum* shed its ties with East German political discourses and adopted largely western-style images of advertising. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the following advertisements, the *Zentralkonsum* continues to promote its long history and, at times, the role it played in the DDR.



Illustration 47: The *Konsum-Berlin* promoting its long history through the image of the opening of a self-serve retail outlet in Berlin in the early 1950s¹⁰⁶⁷



Illustration 48: The new *Konsum-Berlin* membership card being advertised in front of old *Konsum* rebate stamps¹⁰⁶⁸

¹⁰⁶⁶ Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*: 15.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Konsum Berlin 1899 - 28.Juni - 1999, (Berlin: Konsum Berlin).

¹⁰⁶⁸ Advertsing for Konsum Berlin, (Date not give, likely the 2000s).



Illustration 49: A contemporary meat advertisement from the *Konsum-Leipzig* which does not promote its co-operative business structure¹⁰⁶⁹



Illustration 50: A *Zentralkonsum* image indirectly promoting its female workers. The information loosely translates as “Petra Schumann-Abend, 52 years of age, began her studies at the retail college in Leipzig. Since then, she has remained a loyal employee of this organization. In 2002, she was elected to the executive committee, and since 2004 she has been a company spokeswoman.”¹⁰⁷⁰

As suggested by these images, the *Zentralkonsum* has developed multiple advertising strategies. In one sense, the *Zentralkonsum* has become a standard retailer that targets customers primarily concerned with attaining goods at low prices. Thus, in many ways, the *Zentralkonsum*’s advertisers target price-conscious consumers with typical advertisements that draw attention to quality products at competitive prices. Secondly, the *Zentralkonsum* targets the consumer who is aware of its co-operative operating structure and working-class history, especially by promoting its patronage refund, political independence, self-organization, democratic structures, green contributions, and bio foods. In other respects, *Zentralkonsum* advertising targets East Germans with images of old *Konsum* stores and products. In so doing,

¹⁰⁶⁹ Dana Micke, Constanze Treuber, and Steffen Uhlmann, "Konsum Leipzig: Leben & Genießen," *W & M-Extra: Zentralkonsum*, 18.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid.

the *Zentralkonsum* is tapping into the phenomenon of *Ostalgie*, which is a German term playing on the words of *Ost* (east) and *Nostalgie* (nostalgia) and referring to a romanticization of life in the former DDR. Finally, as seen in Illustration 47, the *Konsum* promotes and advertises its equal opportunity employment practices. In the years since the fall of the Wall, the *Konsum* has expanded into new branches of retail, marketing, and the administration of real estate.¹⁰⁷¹

Ironically, *Ostalgie* is by and large expressed in East Germans' longing for the material culture of the former DDR. That is, East Germans sought to maintain their former identities through the rejection of Western products in favour of DDR brands. Another component of *Ostalgie* was the high proportion of workingwomen. For most East Germans, the high percentage of women in the workforce was a source of pride. Indeed, as Stitzel describes, "For those who indulged in *Ostalgie*, East German women's active roles in the spheres of consumption and especially production served as the basis for claims that East German women were more 'emancipated' than their West German counterparts."¹⁰⁷² This quotation by Stitzel has given us something to think about, because this longing is not for East German society, but a society East Germans would have wanted (i.e., with the foundations of gender equality that were already established during the DDR). With consumption, it is clear that East Germans are not really interested in being able to stand in line for East German products of low quality. Instead, it seems that they desire East German products produced by East Germans, which reflect the brighter aspect and ideals of their now extinct state.

10.3. Lessons learned and future research

I came to this topic because of an initial interest in the Soviet occupation and the interaction between Germans and Russians in the immediate postwar years. My views were

¹⁰⁷¹ Kaminsky, "Verband der Konsumgenossenschaften der DDR," 740.

¹⁰⁷² Stitzel, *Fashioning Socialism*: 168-69.

shaped by my previous education, experiences, and interests including the writing of a master's thesis on the 17 June Uprising. Along the way, I encountered topics and issues that were, though not necessarily new to me, much more nuanced than what I now see as the crude binaries of compliance and resistance. As is evident in my footnotes and citations, the authors that brought me to this perspective were Fulbrook, Scott, Bruce, and Foucault. These authors affected my thinking in this fundamental way: the idea that that at least outward participation was a necessary component of individual agency, defiance, and the completion of life goals in a totalitarian society (it is a counter-intuitive notion that one had to participate in order to resist). My conclusions in the end are different/more nuanced than before I engaged with my sources because I now see multiple motivations in the language games and motivations in the development of the sources used in the formulation of this project. And being a non-German meant I had to pay constant attention to understanding nuances of culture, language, and behavior; such examples included developing an understanding of the linguistic styles of the DDR and the basic functioning of the East German state and the origins and development of its political, consumerist, and economic culture. At the same time my perspective as an outsider may also have helped me to ask questions and see things that those directly involved would not have, since many historians of East Germany have, by and large, overlooked the *Konsum*. In the end, my interpretations in this dissertation reflect my own vantage point are still grounded in sources and evidence; and, my hope is that my views will complement those of others and add to the history and interpretation of state-citizen relations, totalitarianism, participation, discourse analysis, consumption, and, more generally, East German historiography.

This dissertation offers a number of conclusions that pushes the East German historiography in new directions. For instance, the *Konsum* helped the ruling Soviets and

German communists implement a Soviet-type society in a portion of postwar Germany. In this sense, understanding the *Konsum* is useful for an examination of the Soviet occupation and the system of rule that was to be imposed on Germans for roughly the next four decades. More generally, this study has contributed to the study of daily life and individual agency in the German Democratic Republic. It has exposed the extent to which the *Konsum* underpinned and solidified SED-rule, even though it was deemed a private, membership-owned, co-operative organization in the wake of the *Wende*. The most explicit example of subservience to the SED was the *Konsum*'s attempts to garner legitimacy for the SED through an enjoyable and abundant consumer culture. Such a consumer culture was also designed to reflect the state narrative of the DDR, namely that it was a modern, socialist, collectivist, and communist society. But, in many respects, the shortfalls of DDR consumer-culture had the opposite effect and convinced many East Germans that the West was the better and more viable alternative to the forms of consumerism discussed throughout. Finally, the *Konsum* should be considered a mass-organization that purposefully inculcated its employees and members with the discourse and symbolism of the East German state. In so doing, it became a highly politicized workplace, while still maintaining some elements of a traditional German co-operative.

The methodology of this research was based on the blending of archival material, secondary sources, and interviews in light of the ideas associated with totalitarianism, modernism, and selective participation. This research and source analysis, moreover, presents a novel departure from the secondary sources cited in this work by illustrating the possible motivations for certain actors, whether state authorities or individuals, to make certain statements and employ specific types of behaviours and discourses. Given the tensions of my conceptual framework (attempted totalitarianism versus selective participation), the sources might lend

themselves to alternate interpretations. I have, therefore, purposefully portrayed the East German state as a régime that was riven with contradictions and paradoxes. Specifically, the state oppressed its citizens, yet it also educated them, gave them jobs, and handed them a gamut of opportunities ranging from leisure activities to reporting on their fellow citizens. Although intended to be a rational distributor of goods, the *Konsum* was a component of the command economy that (paradoxically) contributed to the creation of a barter economy in which the West German Mark and personal favours were the real currencies of value. This dissertation has further attempted to portray a spectrum of attitudes and loyalties to the state, including devotion, loyalty, opportunism, and rejection. And even though this state could be highly repressive, it would also respond to pressure – or in the case of *Eingaben* – voices from below. Because the régime was responding to pressure from below, it shows the intellectual limits of totalitarianism. I have, therefore, used the term – attempted totalitarianism – to describe what I clearly see as a hyper intrusive surveillance state and a party that was *attempting* to have total control and ideological influence over all aspects of life. Of course, the régime was never able to accomplish this.

For future research, an extended use of interviews might be used to round out and eliminate some of the uncertainties inherent in East German primary sources and archival-based research. Of course, interviewees are not without their biases, since people lived varied experiences during the DDR dictatorship and continue to have personal motivations for expressing certain utterances to the interviewer; nevertheless, a broader pool of interviews from the state and the citizenry, as well as intergenerational, gender-based, and locational approaches, might alleviate some of the discrepancies between archival sources and interviewees. To make a further point about archival sources, the *Konsum* left behind a plethora of documents throughout

the former DDR, which are now found in city, state, federal, and Stasi archives. These documents could potentially be used in future research endeavours dealing with the ways in which dictatorships communicate with citizens and to come to wider conclusions about relations between East and West Germany, the International Co-operative Alliance and its relationship with Eastern Bloc countries, state-citizen relations, consumption, and the Cold War. It is my hope that this dissertation will be a contribution to such projects.

The core contribution of this dissertation rests on the central argument that the *Konsum* became an ideologically and symbolically charged junction, where employment and education, as well as the attainment of goods and services at the *Konsum* stores, intersected with political, economic, and material concerns. In spite of its ubiquitous nature and extensive reach, the *Konsum*'s blatant propaganda displays and ideological messages in thousands of *Konsum* retail outlets, during working hours, and political meetings, went, presumably, often ignored. At least, this was the sentiment expressed in interviews conducted for this dissertation. It also seems that propaganda was so stark in other areas of East German life that *Konsum* propaganda was rather mild and even went largely unnoticed. Be that as it may, the *Konsum* became a highly politicized workplace in which employees were both propaganda targets and propagandists who were under constant pressure to conform to various political demands, such as joining the party, partaking in political meetings, undergoing highly politicized educational courses, and proselytizing customers to the ideology of the SED. This role as a conduit of ideology mutated the co-operative system until it was transformed into a hybrid organization, incorporating elements of a political mass-organization while outwardly maintaining some features of the traditional and economic fundamentals of the English and German co-operative movements.

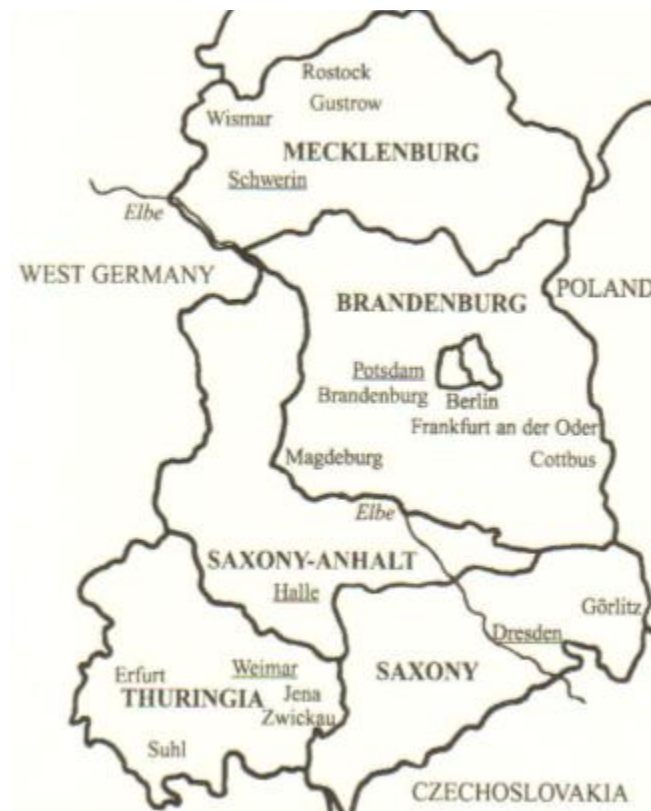
Indeed, instead of being a co-operative, the *Konsum* was more of a microcosm of the former East Germany.

11. Appendixes:

11.1. Maps



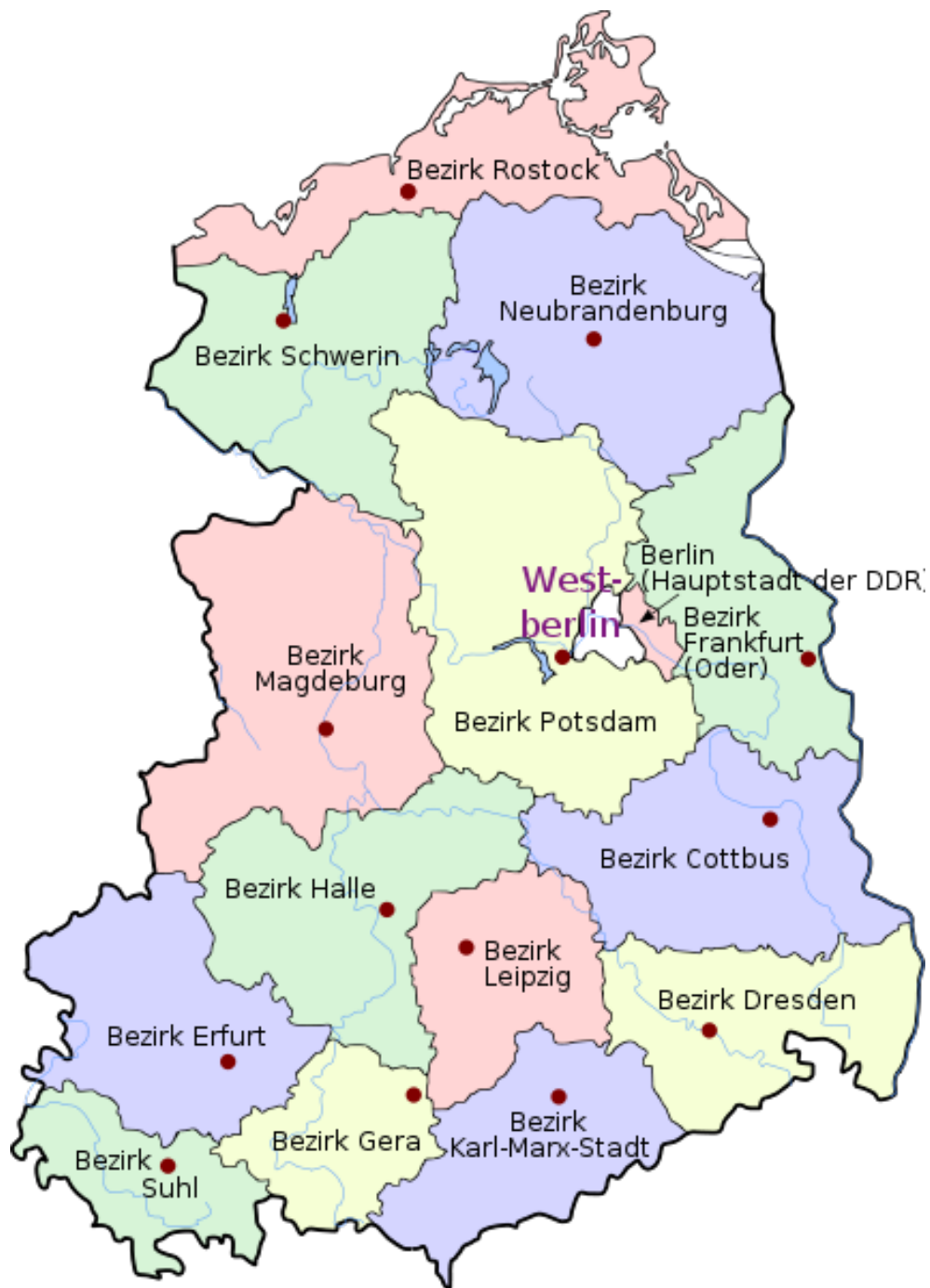
Map 3: DDR in central Europe¹⁰⁷³



Map 4: East German Länder 1945 to 1952¹⁰⁷⁴

¹⁰⁷³ DDR-Europe, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DDR-Europe.png>, (August 2012).

¹⁰⁷⁴ Bruce, *Resistance with the People*: xv.



Map 5: The districts (*Bezirke*) of German Democratic Republic in 1952 to 1990.¹⁰⁷⁵

¹⁰⁷⁵ DDR Verwaltungsbezirke farbig, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bezirk_\(DDR\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bezirk_(DDR)) (August 2012).



Map 6: the extensive network of consumer co-operatives throughout the DDR¹⁰⁷⁶

¹⁰⁷⁶ Ludwig, "Die Anfänge nach 1945," 17.

11.2. Presidents of the VDK

Power within the *Konsum* and, by extension, the VDK was concentrated in the hands of its presidents. According to the *Guide to mass-organizations of East Germany*, the Co-operative Congress (*Genossenschaftstag*) was technically the highest organ of the Union of the Consumer Co-operatives. It determined the fundamental guidelines of the *Konsum* and elected the *Genossenschaftsrat* and the *Revisionskommission*. The resolutions of the co-operative congress were technically binding.¹⁰⁷⁷ However, real power within this organization was centralized under the auspices of the VDK and its president. According to Witho Holland, “the members of the VDK and its presidents were elected, and were neither *Seiteneinsteiger* (somebody who got in through the back door), nor were their prominent positions appointed by the SED.”¹⁰⁷⁸ Holland also claims “none of these men were involved with the Stasi nor given special privileges.”¹⁰⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the following brief biographical sketches reveal a pattern. Specifically, these presidents had long standing connections to the KPD reaching back to the Weimar Republic (1918 to 1933). Many of them had what the SED would define as working class heritage, and the first president of the VDK, Georg Handke, even had anti-fascist legitimacy on account of his imprisonment at the hands of the Nazis. In a “biography-state” like the DDR, proof of one’s antifascism was extremely important for advancement into the upper echelons of power. To put it another way, these presidents actually embodied the values that the state and *Konsum* were proselytising, namely antifascism, working class heritage, and female emancipation.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Becher, Mand, and Akademie für Staats- und Rechtswissenschaft der DDR., *Handbuch gesellschaftlicher Organisationen in der DDR: Massenorganisationen, Verbände, Vereinigungen, Gesellschaften, Genossenschaften, Komitees, Ligen*: 106.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 116.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ibid.

The president of the *Konsum* was given the following responsibilities: establishing guidelines for the economic work of the co-operative network, educating and training workers and functionaries, negotiating with the SMAD and the SED, and developing relations with other political and economic organizations. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the president was able to make personnel suggestions, albeit subject to approval by the SED.¹⁰⁸⁰ Given these responsibilities, the president was a critical position, since the incumbent acted as the symbolic and operational junction between the party and the lower organizational branches of the consumer co-operatives. On a daily basis, the president was constantly facing contrary pressures emanating from party leaders and central economic planners from above and the demands of the co-operative membership and workforce from below. The position was, therefore, the critical juncture in the vertical relationship of power structures in the co-operative organization. The presidential position was also the hub where SED communications were interpreted, ignored, or implemented. According to historian Jeannette Madarász, “the crux of the matter was how these central decisions were translated into real measures and, at this point, a good works director would be able to inject his or her own agenda... There were many more examples of such creativity that ensured a factory’s success.”¹⁰⁸¹ Most work directors recognized that there was nothing to be gained through the involvement of the central authorities; therefore, many of them and their management teams were completely satisfied with solely fulfilling their obligations to the plan. In order to accomplish this, they utilized whatever methods were deemed necessary, including semi-legal initiatives such as building unofficial supply networks, paying additional wages to the workforce, and falsifying the bookkeeping. Again, if the central authorities became

¹⁰⁸⁰ "SAPMO-BA: DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, SED Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, 12 Dezember 1946, Grundsätze für einen Zonenverband der Konsumgenossenschaften," 26.

¹⁰⁸¹ Madarász, *Working in East Germany*: 82.

aware of these less-than-legal initiatives, it could have been potentially disastrous for the *Konsum*'s management and workforce.¹⁰⁸²

The first president of the VDK was Georg Handke, serving from 1949 to 1952.¹⁰⁸³ Handke was the son of a locksmith. At the end of 1918, he became a member of the Spartacus League and the KPD. In 1934, he was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. He spent his incarceration in Ziegenhain, Rockenberg, Butzbach, Kassel-Wehlheiden, and Zwickau, including seven years in solitary confinement. In 1945, the US Army freed him. Because of his imprisonment, Handke was a legitimate antifascist. From July 1945 to 1948, he served as President of the Department of Trade and Supply. Following his tenure as president of the VDK (1949 to 1952), he became ambassador to Romania. From 1958 to 1962, he was a member of the Central Committee of the SED.¹⁰⁸⁴ Handke was succeeded by Margarete Wittowski.

Wittowski was a political economist, communist, and vice president of the VDK from 1950 to 1951 and president of the VDK from 1952 to 1954. She was born to Jewish parents in 1910 and later became involved in the Zionist movement. In 1933, due to the Nazi seizure of power, she immigrated to Switzerland and returned to Germany following the end of the Second World War. Upon her return in 1946, she quickly joined the SED. During her presidency, she stressed, "The consumer co-operatives were to aid in the politicization of towns."¹⁰⁸⁵ Following her tenure as president, Wittowski also held a number of other significant posts, including membership in the People's Chamber and membership in the Central Committee of the SED.¹⁰⁸⁶

¹⁰⁸² Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁸³ Herbst, Ranke, and Winkler, "VDK," 1114.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Dieter Hoffman, "HANDKE, GEORG ULRICH," in *Wer war wer in der DDR? Ein Lexikon ostdeutscher Biographien* (Ch. Links Verlag, 2010).

¹⁰⁸⁵ Ludwig, "Vom Dorfkonsum zum >>Komplexen System der Landversorgung<<," 39.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Hoffman, "Wer war wer in der DDR?."

Historian Mark Landsman suggests that in some ways Wittowski was a consumer advocate and reacted to pressure from below. In fact, she charged the *Konsum* with gaining a better understanding of consumer demand. In her words, “our workers, though they possess sufficient purchasing power to satisfy their demand, do not find the goods they desire to purchase.”¹⁰⁸⁷

Wittowski’s successor was Gerhard Lucht. He was born to working-class parents on 10 June 1913 in Berlin. In 1931, he joined the SPD and was a soldier in the Second World War. Following this he became a member of the KPD and in 1946 a member of the SED. In 1946, Lucht led the organizational establishment of consumer co-operatives in Sachsen-Anhalt, eventually becoming President of the *Landesverbandes Sachsen-Anhalt der Konsumgenossenschaften*. In 1954, he was “elected (*gewählt*)” the president of the VDK – a position that he held until 1963. While Lucht may have been elected, he clearly had the right credentials (i.e., a working-class background and SED membership), and he most likely ran against other men and women with similar family backgrounds and status within the party. During his tenure as president, Lucht also became a member of the People’s Chamber (*Volkskammer*). In October 1963, he left the *Konsum* to become the Minister in charge of the Department of Trade and Provision until 1965. Thereafter he was responsible for the administration of *Kreis Strausberg*.¹⁰⁸⁸

There is archival evidence indicating that Lucht wanted to use the *Konsum*’s propaganda apparatus to aid in the SED’s drive to completely transform the countryside. The party believed that the socialist transformation of agriculture was one of the most difficult components of the transformational period from capitalism to socialism, since this process required the overturning

¹⁰⁸⁷ Mark Landsman, “The Consumer Supply Lobby: Did it Exist? State and Consumption in East Germany in the 1950s,” *Central European History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 491-92.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Gabriele Baumgartner and Dieter Hebig, *Biographisches Handbuch der SBZ/DDR 1945-1990*, vol. I (München: KG Saur, 1996), 495-95.

of centuries-old property relations and consumption habits. These rural retail practices were replaced with the *Konsum*'s modern retail network. During the course of this transformational process, the class structure of the countryside was to be fundamentally transformed. The implementation of such a far-reaching transformation required the collaboration of all the available *Konsum* resources. Accordingly, Lucht, in his speech at the Eleventh Congress of the Co-operative Council of the VDK, declared "it was with great honour that consumer co-operatives helped to resolve these difficult problems during the socialist transformation of the countryside."¹⁰⁸⁹

Archival documents indicate that Lucht actively fulfilled the demands of the party and tightly bound the *Konsum* to the state. During his presidency, the consumer co-operatives became a component of the SED's propaganda and ideological apparatus and transformed themselves from a working-class organization (referring to the period from approximately 1850 to 1933) to a mass-organization (ideologically driven membership organization) of the workers. This development was possible – as Lucht maintained – through the extensive "democratic" and antifascist co-operative work of workers under the leadership of the working-class. His transformation of the *Konsum* into a mass-organization meant that it had to – like all other mass-organizations – recognize the leading role of the SED and implement the political tasks set forth by the party.¹⁰⁹⁰ To directly quote an archival document from the Department of Political Economy,

In self-critical ways, Comrade Lucht (president of the VDK) had demonstrated the weaknesses of our co-operative movement. According to him, the co-operative movement needed to be strengthened in accordance with political agitation

¹⁰⁸⁹ Köppert, "Ein Kampfprogramm zur weiteren Festigung des Bündnisses der Arbeiterklasse mit der werktätigen Bauernschaft," 50.

¹⁰⁹⁰ SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. August 8, 1959 recommendations written by Gehard Lucht, president of the VdK, entitled Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung, Durchführung und Auswertung des IV. Genossenschaftstages, 29.

(*massenpolitische Arbeit*). The ideological clarity – particularly amongst the white-collar workers – needs to be achieved through educational work.¹⁰⁹¹

Here it is important to understand that Lucht was at the helm of the *Konsum* during the period in which this organization produced and disseminated a great deal of highly politicized internal documents, publications, and shop window displays – 1954 to 1963. By extension, it can be safely concluded that he further transformed the *Konsum* to the role of a political mass-organization or, to a lesser extent, a conduit of political slogans. The role of the *Konsum* was discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 and the combination of consumption and propaganda was the primary theme of Chapter 7.

Further archival sources suggest the subservience of Lucht and the *Konsum* to the demands of the party. On 8 August 1959, he clearly stated:

The *Konsum* is no longer a working-class organization; instead, it has become a mass-organization of the workers. This development was possible through the wide, democratic co-operative work of the workers under the leadership of the working-class. Like all other mass-organizations, the *Konsum* had to recognize the leading role of the SED. The comrades in the *Konsum* were required to carry out the political and economic tasks set forth by the party.¹⁰⁹²

This document could be interpreted as Lucht's acquiescence to the pressures placed on him by the SED. Ultimately, it is difficult to determine his actual intentions from this source. What is clear, however, is that he internalized the language and political discourse of Soviet communism, which may have allowed him to conduct actions in the interests of the *Konsum*, as well as protect his personal position without directly challenging the authority of the party.

When Lucht became minister for the Department of Trade and Provision in 1963, Dr. Hilmar Weiß, who was originally an accountant at the Consumer Co-operative in Kreis-Suhl,

¹⁰⁹¹ SAPMO-BA: DY30/IV 2/6.02/74, SED Abteilung Wirtschaftspolitik, Bericht: Über die Zonenkonferenz der Konsumgenossenschaften in Berlin am 14.9.1948, 94-95.

¹⁰⁹² SAPMO-BA: DY/30/IV 2/6.10/133, Handel, Versorgung und Außenhandel. August 8, 1959 recommendations written by Gehard Lucht, president of the VdK, entitled Empfehlungen zur Vorbereitung, Durchführung und Auswertung des IV. Genossenschaftstages, 10.

succeeded him as VDK President. Weiß had a three-year-tenure as president of the VDK.¹⁰⁹³ Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, serving as president of the VDK from 1967 to 1990, succeeded him.

Fahrenkrog was the son of a tradesman and born on 16 May 1926 in Wernigerode (a small city of about 35,000 in Saxony-Anhalt). From 1946 to 1948, he was active in the KPD/SED, FDGB, and the FDJ. His *Konsum* career began as a retail outlet administrator of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Oschersleben* from 1945 to 1950. From 1961 to 1964, he was trained as an economist at the SED controlled college: *Karl-Marx-Parteihochschule*.¹⁰⁹⁴ He later became a departmental administrator within the VDK and then general director of the *Konsum*'s larger "konsument" department stores from 1964 to 1967. In 1967, he became president of the VDK and a member of the People's Chamber.¹⁰⁹⁵

Like his predecessors, President Fahrenkrog subordinated the *Konsum* to the needs of the state and the planned economy. He stated in a 1975 report that the co-operative movement in the DDR enjoyed full freedom with the exception of the following areas:

- Laws of the state: The co-operatives are obligated to abide by the laws valid in the DDR.
- Taxes: The co-operatives are obligated to pay taxes in accordance with pertinent provisions.
- State planning: The co-operatives must take into account the requirements of the planned economy.¹⁰⁹⁶

He stepped down as president in 1990 due to ill health; nevertheless, he had successfully led the *Konsum* through the first difficult months following the fall of the DDR.¹⁰⁹⁷ He was succeeded by Werner Wolf (1990 to 1992).¹⁰⁹⁸

¹⁰⁹³ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 116.

¹⁰⁹⁴ *Die Volkskammer der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik: 9. Wahlperiode*, (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1987).

¹⁰⁹⁵ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 116.

¹⁰⁹⁶ AKB: 1114/A12, Dr. Heinz Fahrenkrog, President of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies of the GDR, *The Consumer Co-operative Societies in the German Democratic Republic*, 31.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Holland, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*: 116.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Herbst, Ranke, and Winkler, "VDK," 114.

It should be noted here that biographical information on the *Konsum* presidents is fragmentary. There are some brief biographical sketches of them in works such as *Wer war Wer in der DDR?* (Who was who in the DDR?).¹⁰⁹⁹ Also, one can find some of their internal correspondence in the archives listed in the bibliography. Yet, given their central position in such a large organization, it is surprising that other historical studies that deal with the *Konsum* do not include wider discussions of their roles. Be that as it may, it is important to understand that their role is vital to comprehending the centralized governing structure of the *Konsum* and why this organization was subordinate to the SED. With that said, an avenue for future research could be a further examination of how these presidents dealt with and circumvented pressure from above (the SED) and below (membership and consumers) and how each president's tenure may have differed from their predecessor and successor.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Černý Černý, *Wer war wer in der DDR? Ein Lexikon ostdeutscher Biographien* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1992).

11.3. Interviews

The Research Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan approved these semi-structured interviews. The interviews followed basic themes relevant to the research topic. The questions were intended to guide the participants and to garner their thoughtful responses. As is often the case, the discussion went outside the expected scope of the interview questions. The respondents were encouraged to tell the stories they regarded as most important. The basic themes of the interview and some associated questions or considerations included but were not necessarily limited to the questions in sub-section 11.3.2.

11.3.1. Ethics Approval

 UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN		Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB) Certificate of Approval	
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Brent Fairbairn		DEPARTMENT History	BEH# 11-22
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED University of Saskatchewan			
STUDENT RESEARCHER(S) Mark McCulloch			
FUNDER(S) INTERNALLY FUNDED			
TITLE "Manipulating the System to their Minimum Disadvantage:" Women, Consumer Cooperatives, and Political and Ideological Indoctrination in East Germany			
ORIGINAL REVIEW DATE 27-Jan-2011	APPROVAL ON 10-Mar-2011	APPROVAL OF: Ethics Application Consent Protocol	EXPIRY DATE 10-Mar-2012
Full Board Meeting <input type="checkbox"/>		Date of Full Board Meeting:	
Delegated Review <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Expedited Review: <input type="checkbox"/>	
CERTIFICATION The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.			
Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.			
ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics_review/			
 Jeffin Rugby, Chair University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board			
Please send all correspondence to:		Research Ethics Office University of Saskatchewan Box 5000 RPO University, 1602-110 Gymnasium Place Saskatoon SK S7N 4J8	

11.3.2. Interview Questions

1. Personal Questions

What is your age?

- ☐ under
- ☐ 20 – 39
- ☐ 40 – 59
- ☐ over

Sex

- ☐ male
- ☐ female

Where did you live in East Germany?

- ☐ Rural Municipality
- ☐ Small town or village (less than 750)
- ☐ Medium town (750 to 1,499)
- ☐ Large town (1,500 to 2,999)
- ☐ Small city (3,000 to 5,999)
- ☐ City (6,000 plus)

What is/was your occupation in the DDR?

2. The Various Roles of the Union of the Consumer Cooperatives of the DDR /

a. Political

What was the political role of this organization?

Was it a tool for building socialism?

What was its role as a mass-organization?

Please compare and contrast the role of this organization in the city in contrast to the countryside.

What was its international role?

Was it an organ of central party control?

b. Propaganda

What was its propaganda role?

Did the propaganda displayed in cooperatives sales outlets have any impact on you?

In your view, was it an effective propaganda apparatus?

3. Perspectives on the Union of the Consumer Cooperative Movement of the DDR

a. Participation

What was your status within this organization?

Were you a member?

When applicable, please describe your role as a staff member, consumer, manager, elected official in this organization.

What types of goods did you buy at the cooperative outlets?

Did you ever eat in cooperative restaurants?

Who ate there?

Were the cultural (music, theatre) activities in these restaurants enjoyable?

Did you ever participate in cultural or educational activities sponsored by this organization?

b. Perceptions

What were your general impressions of this organization?

From your vantage point, please describe this organization's role in comparison with other Mass-Organizations.

What is your understanding or impressions about the goals and objectives of this organization?

Was the local cooperative perceived as a tool of the state, or simply a retail store?

Was the cooperative perceived as a tool for the building of socialism?

4. Organizational Culture / Organisatorische Kultur

a. Working Environment / Arbeitsbedingungen

Please describe the working relationships among staff, between staff and members, between staff and managers, between members, among managers and leaders.

Was there a continual Stasi presence at the workplace within this organization?

Did the East German Cooperatives have the same values and objectives of the régime?

5. Community Cohesion

Please describe the ways in which the local cooperative sales outlet or cooperative restaurant was connected to the local community.

If possible, please describe some of the activities that took place in the *Konsum* stores and organizations.

Please describe some the local projects, initiatives, and activities of the East German consumer cooperatives.

6. Personal and Shopping Experiences and lasting impact of the Consumer Cooperatives of the DDR

a. Loyalty

Please describe if you felt any sense of attachment or loyalty to this organization.

What was the primary motivation for acquiring membership in this organization? Was this motivation political or economic? If political, please define the political advantages of cooperative membership.

Please describe your personal sense of loyalty to this organization in comparison with other mass-organizations.

How important was the patronage refund for you?

b. Personal Experiences

Do you have any colourful stories or anecdotes that you might like to share?

Did you ever send *Eingaben* (protest letters) to this organization?

How do you remember these times?

Would you define your contact with this organization as positive or negative?

Was the *Konsum* something important for you?

7. Women / Frauen

How were women treated by this organization?

8. Education

Please describe your educational experience in this organization.

9. Shopping Experience and Customer Service

How was the customer service?

Could you please describe your relationship with sales personnel?

Were the distribution practices fair?

As a customer, were you treated fairly by the sales staff?

Could you regularly purchase what you wanted?

Were you generally pleased or disappointed with the shopping experience in the consumer cooperative retail outlets?

11.3.3. Interviews Cited

Anonymous (Former DDR *Konsum* Saleswoman) Interview by Mark McCulloch, Essingen Germany, 2011.

Anonymous (Former DDR School Teacher and *Konsum* Employee) Interview by Mark McCulloch, Berlin Germany, 27 June 2011.

Dr. Burchard Bösche, Vorstandsmitglied - Zentralverband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Interview by Mark McCulloch, Hamburg Germany, 26 July 2011.

Martin Bergner (Former Economist for the *Konsum* and Current Spokesperson for the Zentralkonsum), Interview by Mark McCulloch, Berlin Germany, 18 August 2011.

Ulrich Fitzkow (Civil Engineer), Interview by Mark McCulloch, Brunkau Germany, 18 April 2011.

12. Bibliography of sources cited

12.1. Archival sources

For this dissertation, various primary source documents from city, state, and regional archives have been consulted to examine specific aspects of DDR society. The perspective of the régime has mostly been provided by the various holdings from the LAB and the SAPMO. The files of the SWA and the BStU (Stasi archive) yielded insights into the relationship between the *Konsum*, the state, and the population. My access to the BStU was especially fortunate given that institution's centrality in the history of the former East Germany. More specifically, the potential of the SWA and its collection of *Eingaben* and educational reports have been largely untapped. The AKB houses literature produced by the *Konsum*, including newspapers and periodicals. As these publications indicate, the *Konsum* excelled at disseminating the official point of view.

Combined, these sources draw out some of the complexities of a not only social, political, and economic circumstances in the SED-state, but they also highlight the nature of communication and discourse between the state and the people; these interactions, in others words, have shed light on varying degrees of acquiescence, resistance, negotiation, and compromise. It is my hope that the list of archival materials will give the reader a better sense of what I looked at by indicating fruitful and, in many cases, largely unexplored materials. I have, therefore, listed the archive names in full, as well some of their most useful holdings.

AKB	<i>Archiv Konsumverband Berlin</i> (Archive of the VDK housed at the current headquarters of the <i>Zentralkonsum</i> in Berlin)
BStU	<i>Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes</i> The East German secret police archive in Berlin contains files regarding the infiltration of the Stasi into the <i>Konsum</i> workforce and Stasi observations of consumption and consumers within <i>Konsum</i> stores in order to gauge the mood of the population.

- LAB *Landesarchiv Berlin – Berlin State Archives*
 C Rep. 904-35 Grundorganisation SED Konsum-
 genossenschaft Berlin
 C Rep. 904-119 Grundorganisation SED Konsum-
 genossenschaft Pankow
 C Rep. 904-138 Grundorganisation SED Konsum-
 genossenschaft Prenzlauer Berg
 C Rep. 904-200 Grundorganization SED –
 Kaufhallenverband Berlin
 These holding shed light on the everyday functioning of the *Konsum* in
 various districts of Berlin. In addition, they make evident the leading role
 of the SED within this organization.
- SAPMO-DDR *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR – The*
archive of Parties and mass-organization of the DDR housed in Berlin
 Lichterfelde
 DY 30 - ZK der SED, Abt. Wirtschaftspolitik
 DY 30 - ZK der SED, Abt. Handel, Versorgung, und Aussenhandel
 DY 30 - ZK der SED, Sekretariat Paul Merker
 These holdings contain a wide range of correspondence between the SED
 and the *Konsum*. They demonstrate the intentions of both organizations
 and the ways in which they communicated and interacted with each other.
- SSC *Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Chemnitz – the Chemnitz Branch of the Saxon*
State Archive
 Bestand (File) 30878 contains thousands of interesting photos
 pertaining to the consumer co-operatives in Chemnitz from 1877 to
 1996.
 Bestand (File) 30878 contains files from the Abteilung Handel und
 Versorgung
- SSL *Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Leipzig – Leipzig branch of the Saxon State*
Archive
- SWA *Sächsisches Wirtschaftarchiv* is a regional archive in Leipzig which
 houses the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Leipzig* from 1884 to 1990
 and the files of the *Konsumgenossenschaft-Zwickau* from 1873 to 1990.
 At this archive, one can find files pertaining to the ideologically charged
 relationship between women, politics, and consumption.
- TSM *Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Meiningen*

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